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*cine***ACTION**

**Films
OF THE
90s**



cineACTION

43

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STILLS:

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their generosity.

FRONT COVER: Angela Bassett in *What's
Love Got To Do With It?*

INSIDE FRONT: *The Doom Generation*: one of
the key films of the 90s. (l. to r: Johnathon
Schaech, Rose McGowan, James Duval).

BACK COVER: Emma Thompson and Kate
Winslet in Ang Lee's *Sense and Sensibility*, by
far the finest film version of Jane Austen.

INSIDE BACK: *The Wizard of Oz*: David
Lynch's favourite film?



THE CANADA COUNCIL
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DU CANADA
DEPUIS 1957



FILMS OF THE 90s

THIS ISSUE WAS PRODUCED by the CineAction collective, all of whom contributed articles written or chosen by themselves. I was appointed co-ordinator, in which capacity I organized the overall structure: four articles on American films, two on European, one on Canadian, two on Latin-American. Of these, only the first six are on films of the 90s. I also chose most of the stills (none was available for either *Safe* or *Videodrome*).

The 90s has witnessed the ultimate (?) degeneration of Hollywood and the rise into international prominence of a remarkable number of new cinemas: American Independent, Taiwanese and other Asian cinemas, African cinemas, the cinemas of Iran, Latin America and the third world... It has been an exciting decade.
Robin Wood

IF MANY CRITICS ARGUE that Hollywood is at its historical nadir, it has never been so internationally dominant. Hollywood is at the forefront of the much-vaunted cultural globalization, the latest triumph of the West. Not surprisingly, the films of the giant cultural conglomerates are increasingly capital and technology intensive spectacles of first world military hardware and vacuous digitalized effects. The Hollywood of *Independence Day* and *True Lies* is the worthy continuation of "Reaganite Entertainment", as Andrew Britton put it.

Despite the overwhelming economic power of dominant culture, there are many continuing alternative and oppositional developments in world cinema: independent filmmakers in Britain, Canada and the United States, including new gay and lesbian work, the vital cinemas of Asia, the Third Cinema of many countries in the so-called third world and in diasporic communities globally. This issue considers some of the films of these movements. We also include a reconsideration of one of the classics of Third Cinema, marking the recent death of Tomas Gutiérrez Alea, perhaps the most acclaimed of third world directors.
Scott Forsyth

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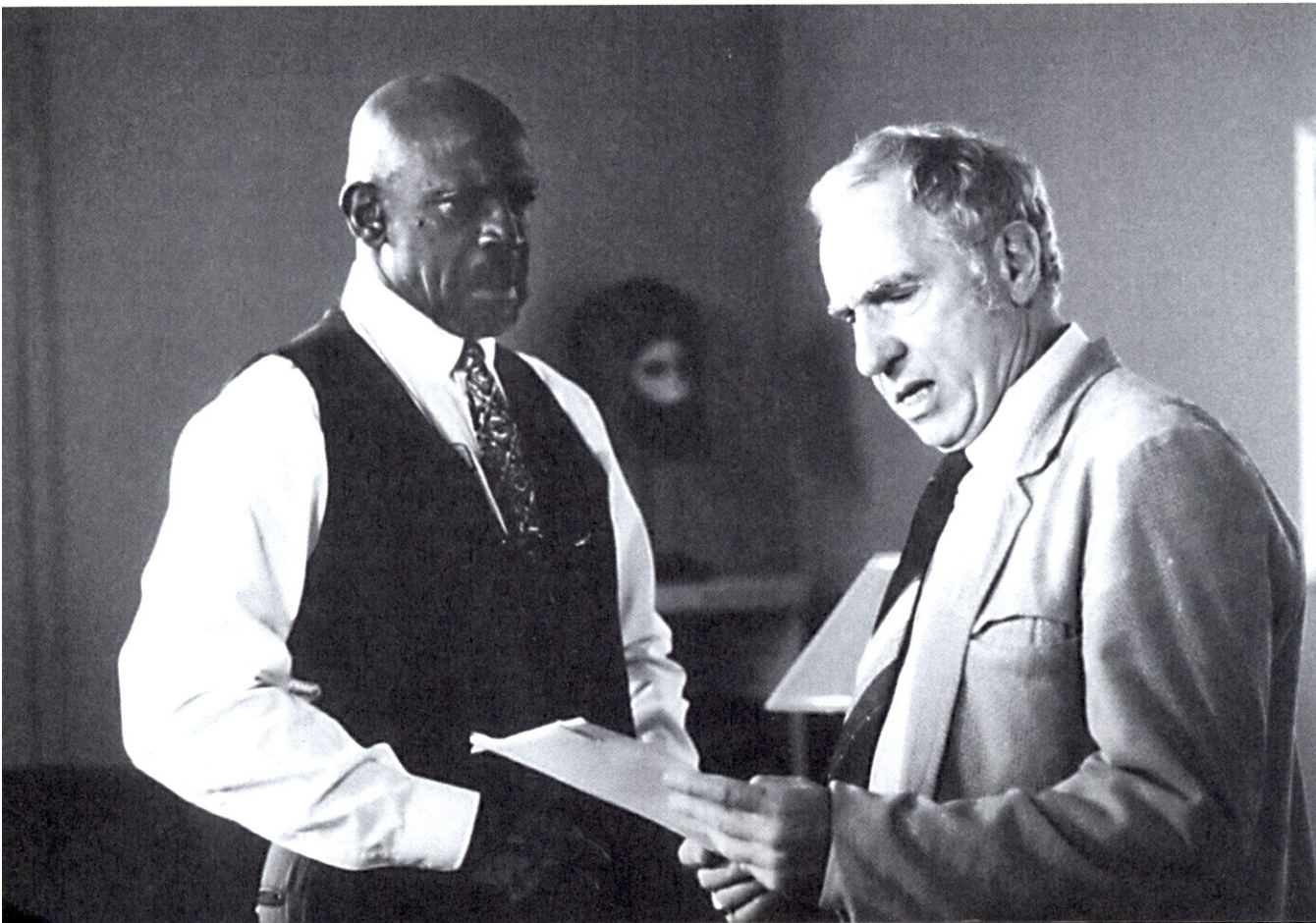
A GREAT DIRECTOR RETURNS

Inside: Arthur Penn's distinguished, undervalued and highly topical film about political persecution and retribution in South Africa.

Interrogation: Nigel Hawthorne, Eric Stoltz.



The interrogator interrogated: Lou Gossett, Nigel Hawthorne.



A GREAT STAR SHINES

Michelle Pfeiffer: One of the few authentic Hollywood stars of the 90s...

...with Beau and Jeff Bridges in *The Fabulous Baker Boys*



...and in *Love Field*



by Robin Wood

The Spectres Emerge in Daylight

WESTERN CULTURE (AND MOST OTHERS, IN SOME FORM?) HAS BEEN HAUNTED THROUGHOUT its history by twin spectres: miscegenation (as threat to white supremacy, and to the still all-too-pervasive implicit assumption of white racial superiority) and homosexuality (as threat to patriarchy). For present purposes, they can be seen to surface very strikingly in *Othello*, conjoined in the character of Iago ('An old black ram is tupping your white ewe') if one accepts the (to me at least highly plausible) psychoanalytic interpretation that he is a repressed homosexual driven to destroy Othello because of a 'dangerous' attraction. Our culture has done its utmost to bury them, drive them down into darkness (where, inevitably, they develop enormous power); but in our own century, with its ever-increasing racial intermingling and the escalating insistence in demands for the recognition of gay rights, they have refused to remain buried. Since the late '60s, the coexistence (however uneasy and problematic) of the black movement and the gay movement, and their (also problematic) coexistence with the women's movement, have ensured that only a new fascism and a new holocaust will bury them again (in which eventuality they will simply, again, develop new strength underground: they will never, now, be annihilated). Their emergence into daylight has been greatly facilitated by (and has in turn facilitated) the general collapse of confidence in the good old (white, patriarchal, nuclear...) 'family values' of bourgeois culture. My concern here is with the increasing recognition and acceptance of that emergence reflected in '90s American cinema.

Miscegenation is the trickier and more delicate issue to discuss, and I shall doubtless get into trouble again for sticking my neck out. The problem is that, while none beyond a tiny handful of oppressive and self-oppressive right-wing gays (and the very notion of a right-wing gay strikes me as a curious contradiction in terms) is likely to oppose full equality (including the right to legal marriage), hostility to miscegenation seems as widespread in the black community as the white: indeed, quite understandably (though regrettably), in that blacks have far more reason to feel resentment and hostility toward whites than *vice versa*. When the hostility is apparently shared by Spike Lee, of whose work I am a great admirer, I hesitate to say (but say it anyway) that *sexual* segregation seems to me merely another form of apartheid. (But the ultimate sense of *Jungle Fever* appears ambiguous: that there is something inherently wrong with an interracial relationship, or that, given the contemporary social situation, the obstacles to its success may be insuperable? — Lee, it seems to me, evades the question by shifting the film's emphasis to the drug problem). I believe, in fact, that as long as the opposition to miscegenation continues, so will racism.

Zebrahead (Anthony Drazan, 1992) is the most intelligent Hollywood film about miscegenation I have seen since *Mandingo*. The latter, made twenty years earlier and set about a hundred and fifty years earlier, apparently remains, for those who would not dream of contaminating themselves by actually seeing it, the piece of exploitative trash it was initially determined (by white, and mostly male, reviewers of the time) to be, such being the power of



The interracial couple and the new millennium:
Ralph Fiennes and Angela Bassett in *Strange Days*.



Interracial relations in *Zebrahead*.

received opinion. I shall not develop a defence of it here, but shall content myself with listing the three components upon which such a defence could be built: 1. It systematically parallels the oppression of women with the oppression of blacks. 2. The only two halfway (but *only* halfway) decent sexual relationships in the film are interracial. 3. It contains an extended, and highly explicit, sequence of sex between a black man and a white woman that develops, before our eyes, from racial exploitation to an exchange of mutual erotic tenderness.

Zebrahead cannot do those things. Sex (here between a white man and a black woman, which white culture appears to find marginally more acceptable) takes place offscreen, and its setting in contemporary America (as opposed to the pre-Civil War era) precludes any possibility of endorsing black revolution (as *Mandingo* clearly does). But it has its own corresponding advantages and strengths. It explores, with remarkable honesty and without sentimentality or evasion, the problems of interracial sexual relations today in the context of a cultural situation where the lovers are supposedly free individuals but come from polarized and in some respects deeply antagonistic communities. The honesty survives the apparent 'happy ending': the lovers are tentatively reunited, but the film offers no sense that the obstacles have ceased to exist, and no guarantee that the relationship has a future. The film's endeavour is simply to enlist the audience's hope that such relationships might become easier in a changing world. Yet the film (given a very limited release) has had no sequel: while *Mandingo* remains vilified, *Zebrahead* has simply been overlooked.

Zebrahead belongs to the genre of the 'social problem film': it is explicitly and singlemindedly *about* race and miscegenation as social issues. I am more interested (because, from a certain viewpoint, it is more significant while less ostentatious) in the ways in which interracial sexual relationships have filtered down into our so-called 'entertainment' cinema, where they cease to be presented as a 'social issue' to the extent that they seem taken for granted. (I am concerned at this stage with *heterosexual* relationships, and shall leave the curious and tantalizing phenomenon of the Adam Sandler/Damon Wayans relationship in *Bulletproof* for the latter part of this article). Four films come to mind, which fall conveniently into two ill-assorted pairs, the distinction being that the first two are centred on relationships between a white man and a black woman, while the latter pair reverses this.

1. *Corrina, Corrina*/*Strange Days*.

Neither need detain us long. The former amounts to no more than (in fact much *less* than) *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* with an interracial twist: the question is not, Who will be the better wife for Ray Liotta?, but, Who will be the better mother for his child? Sex barely comes into it, Whoopi Goldberg's persona (her *entrée* into the world of white-dominated comedy?) being built upon asexuality. The couple exchange a chaste kiss, and our sensitivities are spared any unfortunate mental image of them in bed together. I suppose the film (which looks and behaves like a one-hour TV show, tediously padded to feature length) has a certain sociological interest in suggesting



that a black woman *might* be an acceptable presence in a completely boring white suburban culture as something more than a maidservant. *Strange Days* is far less yawn-inducing, partly because Kathryn Bigelow has a real flair for what in showbiz terms is called, I believe, 'the old pizzazz' (meaning, today, plenty of special effects and stunt work). It is also a tease and a cheat: it *seems*, in its first half, actually to be promising, for the celebration of the millennium, a black revolution, but finally produces an elderly (i.e. father-figure) policeman to set things right, giving a very precise definition to the term cop-out, of which we have already seen so many. On the other hand, the millennium *is*, finally, celebrated by the construction of an interracial couple (Ralph Fiennes/Angela Bassett), which, as mainstream Hollywood auguries for the future go, makes some amends.

2. *Bad Company/Love Field...*

But before I pass to my second pair, let me introduce a parenthesis: I would like to develop the observation above that white culture seems more resistant to the black man/white woman relationship than *vice versa*. There are questions to be asked: First, is the reverse true of black culture (i.e., are blacks more worried if the *male* half of the relationship is white)? Second, why is this so important? The answer to the first I can only guess at: Yes. The answer to the second explains why: white and black culture remain (whatever advances have been made) solidly patriarchal; the woman is subordinate, and should (ideally) have no voice in the matter, being essentially an adjunct, hence obedient; she is the possession of the male,

and we all have to fight for and defend our possessions, whatever our colour, don't we?; the woman's role is to be the bearer of children, which then become essentially the further possessions of the father, she is merely the passive receptacle of the great and mighty phallus and its seed. Such notions, which may seem so strange and alien to many of us, have had a very long existence, and it may take several more generations to eradicate them. The crux (on both sides, the black and the white) is therefore the reality of female sexuality and desire as active rather than merely passive and subordinate. Male resistance to this accounts, no doubt, for the remarkable description (in the capsule review of *Mandingo* in the Maltin *Movie and Video Guide*) of the character played by Susan George as James Mason's 'oversexed daughter': leaving aside the fact that she is married to Mason's son, she has been brutally rejected by her husband because she isn't a virgin, virtually imprisoned in a mansion that would make the House of Usher look like a Holiday Inn, and denied even a minimal display of tenderness. When she expresses a need for sexual satisfaction, she becomes, automatically, 'oversexed'. (In *Zebrahead*, sexuality is not emphasized; in *Corrina, Corrina* it is virtually eliminated; in *Strange Days* it is simply not an issue—our minds (or what little of them we have left by that point in the relentless filmic bombardment) are kept far too occupied to worry about such things).

Many readers may never even have heard of *Bad Company*, which received a minimal and (on the whole deservedly) short-lived release: it was (and I suppose still is, somewhere) a '90s film noir starring Laurence Fishburne and Ellen Barkin.

Bottle Rocket:
the three hapless
(and hopeless)
would-be bank
robbers.



Bottle Rocket: Dignan seems to be wondering why the love of his life is so interested in a woman.

It's a pity it's such a bad film (one of those tedious intrigues where everybody is doublecrossing everybody, and who cares?), because the explicit sex scenes between the two stars have an erotic charge that seems unique in contemporary mainstream cinema. Within certain limitations, however: the sex is presented as merely *that*, i.e., they are sex scenes, not love scenes: there is nothing comparable to the gradual progression of the Susan George/Ken Norton sex scene in *Mandingo* into erotic tenderness, as opposed to erotic frenzy; and as Barkin plays a typically duplicitous *femme fatale*, we are not sure, by the end, whether she was carried away or just faking. Is the commercial failure of *Love Field* (clearly the most distinguished of the four films) attributable to its black man/white woman romance? A question I can't answer. I like to believe that the film would have done better had it been bolder. Once again, sexual desire is not really an issue; apparently, the couple (Michelle Pfeiffer/ Dennis Haysbert) sleep together, but it's glossed over with almost as much reticence as one is accustomed to in classical Hollywood movies made within the restrictions of the Motion Picture Production Code, and there's no more than token erotic charge in their onscreen exchanges. However, here is a film in which a major female star (and certainly one of the finest presences in contemporary Hollywood film) is actually permitted (obviously with her own full endorsement) to end the film in a relationship with a black man, the permanency of which has as much guarantee as one can expect from a film produced in an age when the traditional guarantees (the sanctity of marriage, romantic love) have become increasingly inoperative.

However, it must be acknowledged that all four films evade the real problems by isolating their characters from their respective social backgrounds and the pressures these would inevitably exert. *Corrina, Corrina* makes a feeble attempt to deal with this (Ray Liotta has snooty preying neighbours—with whom he appears to have no connection beyond the proximity of their homes—and Whoopi Goldberg's mother is initially hostile, though she succumbs readily enough to Liotta's charms). In the other films the leading characters are

placed in situations (the Millennium, a cross-country journey, the world of *film noir*) in which familial or environmental connections are either non-existent or irrelevant.

Two Addenda

1. *Freeway* deserves a special mention (perhaps an award) for the most erotic French-kissing ever seen on the screen. Its first twenty minutes, in fact, qualifies much of what has been said above, since it foregrounds an active female sexuality within an interracial relationship: Reese Witherspoon is palpably turned on by Bokeem Woodbine (as who indeed wouldn't be?). One very much regrets his early demise (as clearly one is meant to), but it seems demanded by the film's unpredictable narrative convolutions rather than by any squeamishness about miscegenation.

2. *Lone Star*.

White/Hispanic relationships appear to give white persons less distress than white/black ones. The real issue is not so much one of race as of skin colour: the darker you are, the more frightening you become. I continue to be very disturbed by our culture's use of the terms 'white' and 'black' to denote (very inaccurately) racial difference: they will never be cleansed of their traditional connotations of good and evil, and are consequently deeply and irreducibly racist. But we seem to be stuck with them for the time being. The sooner we begin to accept that we are *all* 'persons of colour', that the white/black opposition is a demonstrable falsehood, the better, and the exact shading will cease to matter. The distinction of *Lone Star* lies in the completeness of its taboo-breaking radicalism. Its eminently satisfying 'happy ending' incorporates, without the least fuss or hysteria: the discrediting of 'the Father'; a fully equalized male/female relationship; miscegenation; brother/sister incest. You can't do a much more thorough job than that. It will clearly stand as one of the most important American films of the '90s.

Homosexuality

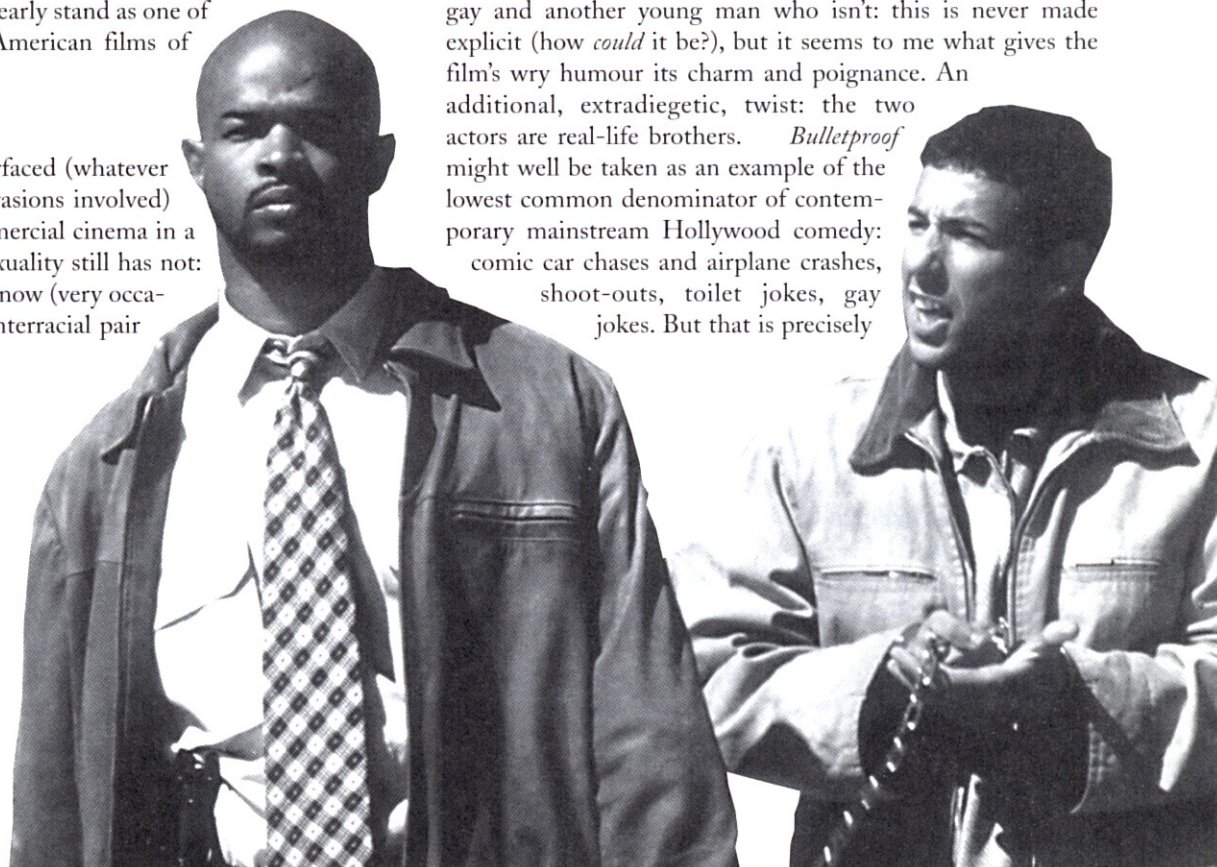
Miscegenation has surfaced (whatever the restrictions and evasions involved) into mainstream commercial cinema in a way in which homosexuality still has not: a Hollywood film can now (very occasionally) produce an interracial pair

as its 'good couple' at the happy ending, but no mainstream film has yet done that for a same-sex couple. (The term 'mainstream', however, is slightly slippery: *Bound* might be considered a mainstream film in terms of its generic affinities and its wide release, but it remains a film whose existence depended upon 'independent' initiative). Though the more blatant forms of homophobia can no longer be paraded with quite the same confidence as in the past, the dominant tendency is still to offer up gay relationships as funny, harmless and fundamentally 'different' (*The Birdcage*, not to mention the unspeakable *To Wong Foo...*, which insults gays in much the same way as Beeban Kidron's previous *Antonia and Jane* insulted women). On the other hand, the emergence of gay themes and gay relationships outside mainstream Hollywood has been far more pervasive and insistent, amounting to a veritable explosion. I am not concerned here with films made primarily for gay audiences, though my neglect should certainly not be taken as some kind of misplaced hostility: on the contrary, the existence of such films has meant a lot to me personally. My concern is with the degrees to which homosexuality seems (I don't want to be more precise than that) to be gaining acceptance—at least within a certain range of the 'general audience'—with films that appear addressed to heterosexual audiences but presuppose an interest in and acceptance of gay issues and gay relationships. Here, I want to discuss six films that also fall into pairs: two that are not *explicitly* gay but qualify as 'love stories between men' (Hawks's remarkably candid description of *A Girl in Every Port* and *The Big Sky*), two British films, two American independents.

Bottle Rocket/Bulletproof

Bottle Rocket (a slight but delightful minor work) requires only brief comment here. It might be described as a gay love story between one young man who is too naive to realize that he's gay and another young man who isn't: this is never made explicit (how *could* it be?), but it seems to me what gives the film's wry humour its charm and poignance. An additional, extradiegetic, twist: the two actors are real-life brothers. *Bulletproof* might well be taken as an example of the lowest common denominator of contemporary mainstream Hollywood comedy: comic car chases and airplane crashes, shoot-outs, toilet jokes, gay jokes. But that is precisely

Bulletproof:
Damon Wayans
and Adam Sandler



what gives it its interest. Let it be said at once that the film's misogyny is unfortunate: in a tradition that goes right back to *A Girl in Every Port*, the reconstruction of the male couple demands the discrediting and elimination of the woman who has come between them. What I find interesting is the film's gay humour, which seems to me (or have I seriously misread it?) of an altogether different nature from the casual, prejudice-pandering homophobia typical of such movies, of which perhaps the most extreme instance is the notorious scene in *Ace Ventura, Pet Detective* of Jim Carrey's hysterical reaction to the belief that he's kissed a man by mistake. (One might I suppose argue that the scene's humour lies not in the character's disgust but in the ridiculous excess of its expression, but one somehow doubts if that's how it is read by the kind of extremely unsophisticated spectator the film seems aimed at. The film was extremely popular with children). The tone of the gay jokes in *Bulletproof* is at least ambiguous, and can be read as something more than that. The complicated plot has Rock (Damon Wayans) as an undercover cop who betrays his 'best buddy' Moses (Adam Sandler), who had hitherto trusted him absolutely. Rock has the task of taking Moses across country to trial, and they are pursued by the gang of drug dealers they have exposed (inadvertently on Moses' part) who want their revenge. The key scene occurs in a lonely motel run by an apparently conservative and unattractive man called Charlie (who appears at first a stereotypical comic butt). With Rock within hearing, Moses leans across the counter and addresses Charlie confidentially:

Moses (indicating Rock): He says he's not gay, but, er, I'll see what a few drinks and a back massage'll do to him, huh? That might get him up a little. Look at him, the way he's standin'. (Rear-view shot of Rock talking on the phone, bent over, his ass protruding). Waitin' for you.

Charlie looks somewhat interested, then shakes his head, but indecisively.

Moses: Say, is that your wife back there? (Close-up of photograph on Charlie's desk: his wife appears to be a man in drag). Goddamn. She's hot.

Charlie (humbly): Thank you.

Rock, phone conversation concluded, asks for a room.

Charlie: The only room we have available is the...er...Honeymoon Suite.

(Enthusiastic wolf-call from Moses, offscreen; he addresses Charlie again).

Moses: Me, you, the old lady, a little sandwich action? Come on, you're a piece of white bread, she's a piece of white bread, I'm the salami.

Charlie (innocently): She's not eating sandwiches, she's on a diet right now.

In the Honeymoon Suite, Moses sings in the shower while Rock lies on the double-bed, covering his ears.

Moses (singing loudly): We both know/I'm not what/ You nee-ee--ed. I'll always love you...I'll always love youuu...

Rock: Shut up.

Moses: You'll always be my body guard, you know that.

Moses then tries to escape, naked and covered in soap,

through the shower window, and gets stuck. Charlie passes by outside with a wheelbarrow. Cut to Moses' bare ass. Rock sticks the barrel of a gun up it. Moses screams, Charlie watches with great interest.

Rock: Let me guess, you dropped the soap.

Moses: Please take that out of my ass.

Rock: I want you on the bed, *now*.

Subsequently, we see Charlie on the phone to his wife, trying to persuade her into a 'sandwich'.

Obviously, the scene could have been played for crude homophobic laughs, but it isn't. After Jim Carrey's relentless and tiresome mugging, Adam Sandler's understated acting style (he delivers all his lines 'straight', as it were) comes as an immense relief. As I see it, the implication of the scene (and this seems borne out, or at least nowhere contradicted, by the rest of the film) is that Moses is indeed gay and fully aware of it, but knows that the man he is in love with will never see him as other than a 'buddy', and therefore falls back on a gentle, offbeat humour that both acknowledges and denies his commitment. Later in the film, when the rift between the two men begins to heal, Moses tells Rock 'I'm not going to get mad at you. I'm falling in love with you all over again.' And Charlie, the comic stereotype, suddenly springs into life as an action hero, saving the couple's lives by rescuing them from an assault by the drug gang: the film is full of little surprises. It's true that, in the final sequence, Moses (now a bullfighter in Mexico!) is surrounded by sexy and admiring young women. Yet his ambition to become a bullfighter (who, on his own admission, would never dream of hurting a bull) seems centred upon the attraction of a fancy, flamboyant costume, and his female adorers are abruptly dismissed when Rock turns up (unable, apparently, to keep away, and now expressing his *real* allegiance—the film should have ended with the two happily in bed together, but obviously that is too much to ask just yet. Perhaps one day...).

The significance of all this seems to me considerable: that it can now be assumed that the idea of gayness is no longer unacceptable to general audiences even on the level of the lowest comic denominator (provided, of course, that there are no explicit gay love scenes), and that implications of gayness can now be something for audiences to laugh *with* rather than *at*. From this point of view, *Bulletproof* may be a more important movie than the other, more distinguished, films discussed here.

(A postscript, however: I showed *Bulletproof* to my thirty-two-year-old heterosexual son, and he remarked that he couldn't understand why I didn't find it offensive, because it's so homophobic. He may well be more in touch than I am with how films are read by contemporary audiences).

Beautiful Thing/Hollow Reed

The emergence of a gay thematic (as opposed to the 'liberal' introduction of sympathetic minor gay characters) into a cinema that appears to be, at least to some extent, addressed to a heterosexual spectatorship is by no means confined to North American independent filmmaking (for which see below). One finds it suddenly in films from all over the world, includ-

ing countries most of us, in our naivety, have supposed 'backward' in relation to the 'progressive' movements of our own culture, so that one may see this (whatever it actually presages socially and politically—one mustn't become *too* optimistic) as a worldwide phenomenon. Here, I shall content myself merely with a modest excursion into British cinema.

Beautiful Thing, securely centred on the formation and celebration of a relationship between two working-class male teenagers, does not seem addressed primarily to a gay audience. Though gays must surely be charmed by it, they don't really need, today, to be told how wonderful it would be if gay relationships became socially acceptable. What it attempts, very courageously, to do, is to sweep aside, unconditionally and without argument, any suggestion that prejudice against them might have the least validity. I have no information as to what audiences it has actually reached, but it certainly does everything it can, within the current social situation, to disarm all opposition.

Beautiful Thing, however, is perhaps too easy, insulating itself carefully from any wider social issues beyond a celebration of the gay couple that leaves the heterosexual norms intact. *Hollow Reed* plunges boldly into deeper waters, as a result of which it is much less obviously an audience-pleaser, the satisfactions it offers being harder won and more challenging: heterosexual marriage and the nuclear family by no means emerge unscathed.

The film's title evokes the introduction to Blake's *Songs of Innocence*:

Piping down the valleys wild,
Piping songs of pleasant glee,
On a cloud I saw a child
And he laughing said to me...

Piper, sit thee down and write
In a book that all may read
So he vanish'd from my sight.
And I pluck'd a hollow reed,

And I made a rural pen,
And I stained the water clear,
And I wrote my happy songs
Every child may joy to hear.

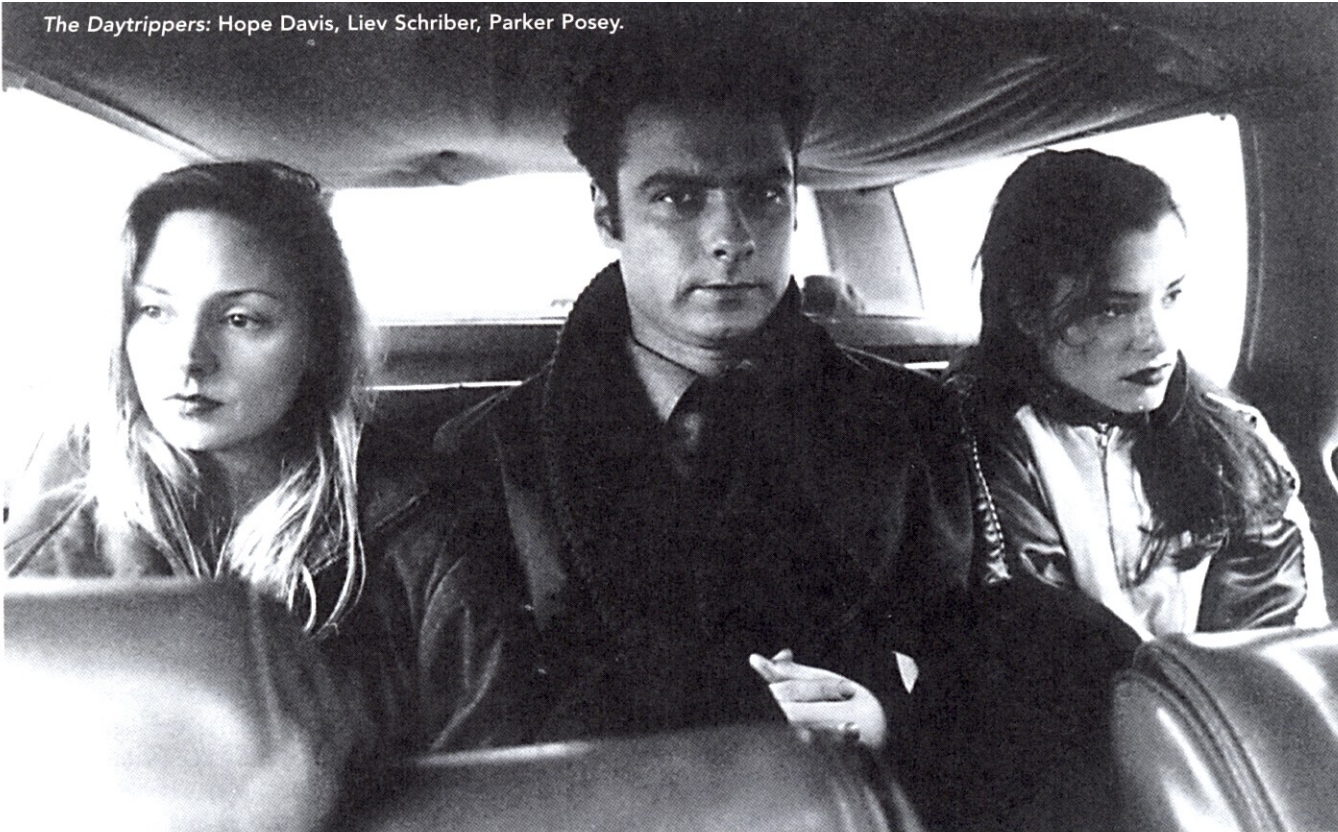
Clearly, the reference to the poem is oblique and partly ironic: by no stretch of the imagination is *Hollow Reed* a 'happy song' of 'pleasant glee'. The film is, however, centred on a child, and what is very much an issue is the child's innocence and the ways in which it is threatened. The threat comes, not from the fact that the father has come out as gay and has left to live with another man (the child Oliver accepts this, innocently enough, without question), but from his father's replacement, the wife's new lover: he is not only physically abusive (a legacy, we learn, from his own childhood with an abusive father who carried out his punishments in the name of morality and righteousness), he also takes the boy into the bathroom, locks the door, and forces upon him the notion that what his father now does

in bed is disgusting and loathsome, an outrage to the imperatives of 'normality' (i.e. heterosexuality and the traditional family).

The *Songs of Innocence* were of course 'answered' by the *Songs of Experience*, and Blake seems at times to hint that, although the two worlds are clearly distinguishable, their separation cannot be absolute (the apparently simple line 'And I stained the water clear' already carries ominous overtones, suggesting that the adult poet, however 'happy' his songs, can scarcely avoid introducing some form of contamination). We are left uncertain at the end of *Hollow Reed* of the extent to which Oliver has been damaged. He is living with the father and his young lover, and the film makes it clear that this is essentially *his* decision, endorsing it as the right one. By this point the mother's lover has been thoroughly discredited and expelled, but the mother (a marvellous performance by Joely Richardson in what is arguably the film's best-written role) has been discredited too: she has placed her own needs (for a sexual fulfilment her marriage—on her husband's own admission—conspicuously lacked) above her child's, and lied for her lover during the custody case. The final scene is complex and touching. The mother visits Oliver in his new home, and finds him in the makeshift playroom engrossed in a game with his father's young lover; she is able to accept this now, and asks Oliver if he will visit her sometimes. Oliver maintains a stoic, enigmatic silence. We cannot be sure how deeply or irreparably he has been hurt. The film is quite clear, however, about attributing blame: not to homosexuality, not to individuals, so much as to traditional concepts of marriage-and-family that exclude all awareness of the complexities of human sexuality.

Chasing Amy/The Daytrippers

Is it becoming possible to speak (however tentatively) of an American 'New Wave', with Linklater as its Truffaut and Araki as its Godard? There can be no comparison in terms of impact: the new American independent cinema is not going to change the course of film history, and history may record it as less wave than ripple. The cultural situation is very different, and far less nurturing. The independent movement in America has no *Cahiers* behind it, and no immediate nourishment from benign father-figures (as the *Nouvelle Vague* had Bazin, Renoir, Rossellini). The *Nouvelle Vague* opposed itself to an already moribund *Cinema de Qualite* (or, as it was renamed, *Cinema de Papa*); today's young American independents are up against a dominant cinema which, although increasingly monolithic, sterile and spiritually bankrupt, has behind it the megabucks of international corporations and a massive arsenal of technology with which to dazzle and mystify its audiences. Yet it is difficult to hold in check one's excitement as film after film emerges from an increasing number of new directors who have in common only the desire to make oppositional movies: oppositional, in most cases, not merely to the Hollywood mainstream but to the dominant forces of the culture that continues to sustain it. And, in so far as these filmmakers admit to influences, they are not from the contemporary mainstream but from foreign films and classical Hollywood. Thus Araki acknowledges everywhere his admira-



tion for Godard, and declares that *The Living End* was inspired by *Bringing Up Baby*, 'the most brilliant American film ever' (*The Doom Generation* is actually closer to Hawks's original, testifying to its continuing influence); and Linklater expresses his love of Renoir, and gets Julie Delpy and Ethan Hawke to watch *The Clock* and *Letter from an Unknown Woman* before shooting starts on *Before Sunrise* (he says that both films were 'inspirational'). Two recent independent films are central to my concerns here.

Both *Chasing Amy* and *The Daytrippers* demand detailed attention there is no space for here; I shall limit discussion to some brief notes on the emergence, in each film, of the spectre of male homosexuality toward the end, toward which both films move (if it is a surprise, it is on reflection a logical one). This of course neatly sidesteps the big problem *Chasing Amy* raises: its heroine Alyssa's abrupt transition from lesbian promiscuity to heterosexual monogamy. The obvious male heterosexual chauvinist reaction ('All she needed was a good fuck') is clearly not endorsed by the film, since her conversion occurs before she has had a fuck at all, good or bad, at least from the film's male protagonist Holden (Ben Affleck); and the film subsequently explains her (not, perhaps, entirely satisfactorily) by revealing that she had previously been through a period of elaborate experimentation, turning to lesbianism after a disillusioning night of exploitive heterosexual group sex. But (as will have been noted) this article does not presume to 'take on' lesbian issues, though their emergence closely parallels that of male homosexuality. We need, and would welcome, a parallel article dealing with this, but it should be written by a lesbian.

Chasing Amy (a film addressed to a spectatorship that enjoys being challenged and made to think) can do what *Bulletproof* (addressed to audiences who just want a few good

laughs) can't quite do (though it hovers perilously on the verge): it renders explicit the underlying homoerotic element in the traditional 'buddy' relationship that gives it its energy and intensity but which, within a homophobic culture, must always be denied. We are all accustomed to films that dramatize this quandary, by capitalizing on the homoeroticism but carefully disowning it, usually by the introduction (often quite arbitrary) of an overtly gay character who is either vicious (e.g. *Scarecrow*) or too clownish to be taken seriously (e.g. *California Split*), on to whom gayness can be displaced ('Our heroes are not like *that*'). At the end of *Chasing Amy* Holden reveals that he knows what the spectator has suspected for a long time (but never expected the film to acknowledge): that his best friend's antagonism to Amy is motivated by sexual jealousy. Feeling alienated, at this point, from both Alyssa and his friend Banky, and wanting to bring them all together again, he proposes a 'threesome': they will all have sex together, and he will catch up with Alyssa's enviably varied experience of sexuality. Banky accepts, Alyssa refuses. This extremely provocative (and somewhat provoking) scene raises a number of interesting questions, such as What does the spectator want to happen (to *see*), and Why does the male protagonist want this? To answer the first question honestly, Yes, I wanted them to go to bed together, to see what would happen. Had this taken place (and is this why it didn't?), the second question would have been answered also: we would have seen whether Holden was acknowledging a sexual interest in his friend, or whether he saw this merely as a means of regaining his friendship. The omission of this scene, and the use of Alyssa to veto it, may amount to another evasion, in a film that seems not to want to evade anything. Evasion or not, this is a fascinating film.

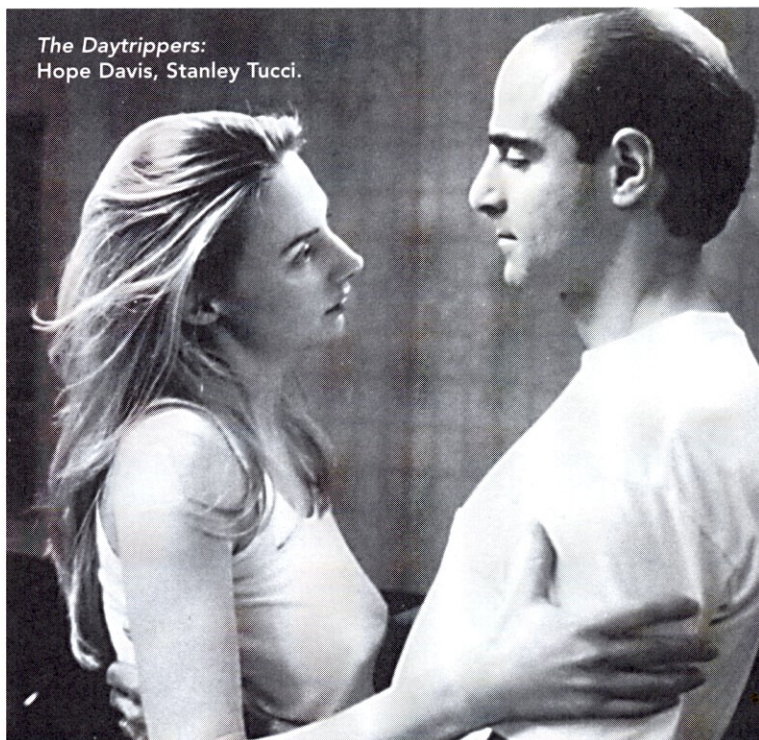
The premise of *The Daytrippers* could be precisely that of a

classical Hollywood comedy: husband (Stanley Tucci), after a tender domestic morning scene, leaves for his office in the city; wife (Hope Davis), doing the housework, finds (carelessly dropped just under the bed) a love note signed 'Sandy'; she tells her mother, who promptly organizes a trip into the city to track down the husband and confront him, accompanied by her younger daughter and her boyfriend. The narrative continues along traditional lines, with various delays and complications: the husband is not in his office but is to be out all day, expected at an evening reception for a currently fashionable novelist; they track him to an apartment building where they watch (from a distance) as he leaves and says goodbye in the street to an attractive young woman; they lose him again and are distracted by other mishaps and encounters; he is not at the reception... We could still be in familiar territory, except that, with each episode, the tone darkens, the humour becomes more edgy and disturbing. More specifically, each encounter illustrates a different tension, disturbance, disruption within family relationships: a delinquent father is living off his son in secret while failing to pay his ex-wife alimony; two sisters, both high strung and neurotic, bicker over possessions. This progression is counterpointed by the steady deterioration of relationships within the family on whom the film is centred, and the escalating collapse of traditional values: most notably, the younger daughter (Parker Posey), abruptly attracted to a handsome and intelligent young man (Campbell Scott) at the reception for the novelist, even more abruptly abandons her fiancé Carl (the wonderful Liev Schreiber)—who has the mother's fervent endorsement as ideal son-in-law—on the pretext of forgetting her handbag, returning to the reception for a quick and passionate embrace and exchange of phone numbers. What we have is the 'family comedy' brilliantly updated and culminating in the family's apparently final disintegration.

The traditional 'classical' comedy would move of course to the discovery that 'it was all a mistake' and 'there's an innocent explanation for everything'. *The Daytrippers*, on the contrary, moves not merely to the revelation that the husband has indeed been 'unfaithful', but that he has been unfaithful with another man: the disintegration of the nuclear family, in other words, coincides precisely (and is precipitated by) the emergence of the 'spectre' from the darkness. (To my friends, who are obviously more 'hip' than I am, this apparently was exactly what they were expecting; I must confess that, in my innocent way, I experienced it as one of contemporary cinema's most stunning surprises, having continued to read the film along traditional lines, in expectation of the traditional ending. On second viewing, this seemed not merely 'innocent' but insensitive and imperceptive: the film's trajectory would make any traditional 'happy ending' a flagrant cheat). It ends, unexpectedly but quite logically, with the two sisters going off together, abandoning their parents and their (actual or imminent) marital ties, presumably to try to sort things out and *think*.

The current right-wing assault on gay rights is firmly centred on the belief that 'family values' are being threatened. The gay response has been, overall, to assert that this is not the case, that gays form 'families' of their own. Both are absolute-

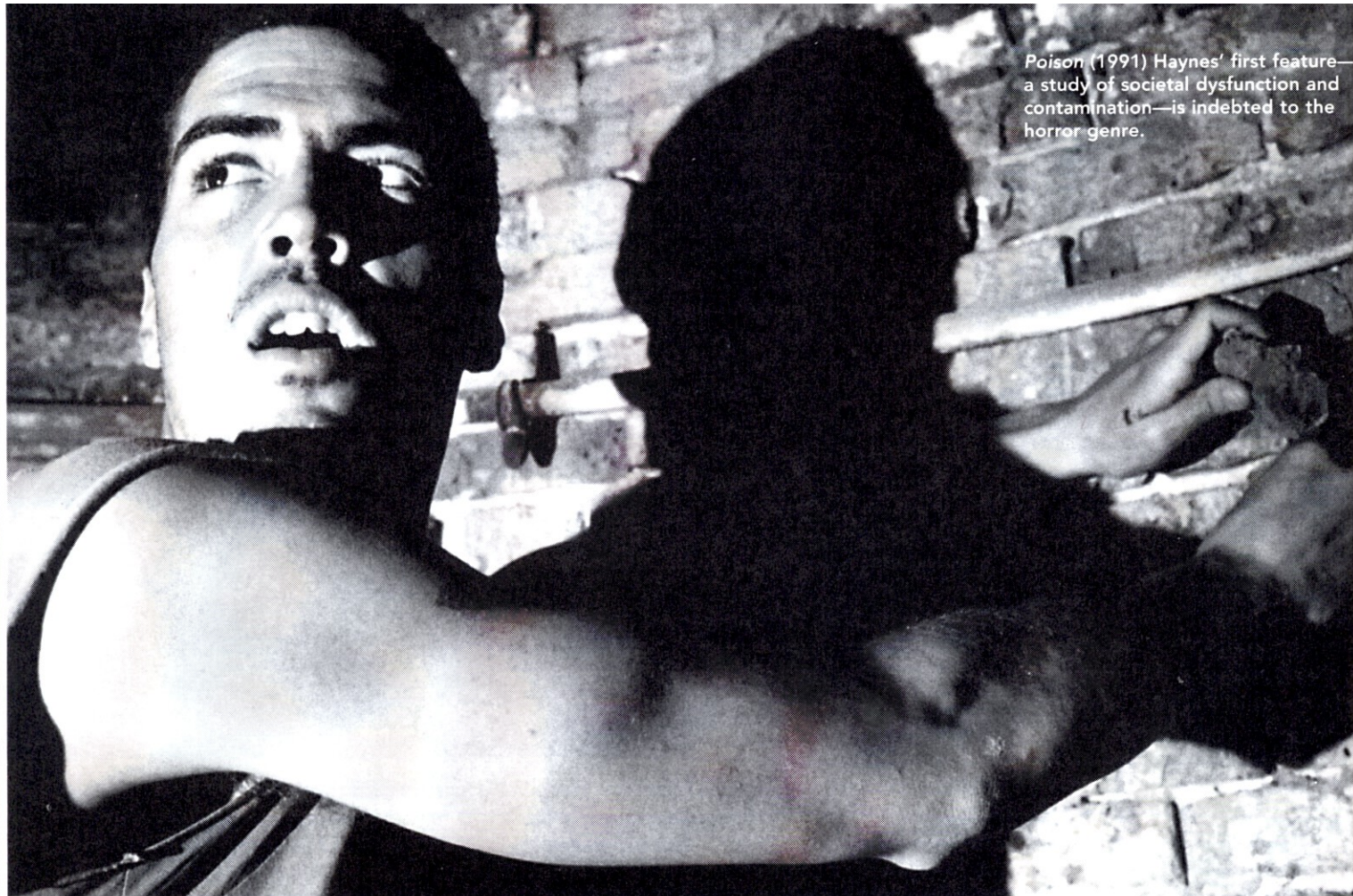
The Daytrippers:
Hope Davis, Stanley Tucci.



ly correct. The point is, surely—and this is precisely why *The Daytrippers* is one of the key films of our age—that gays do indeed constitute a threat to *traditional* family values, that is, to the values of the patriarchal nuclear family. That there can still be 'families', in some sense of the word, is not open to question: families no longer dominated by the figure of 'the Father' (actual or, in its own way, spectral), no longer preoccupied with biological parentage, no longer tied to notions of permanence, 'fidelity' (in the purely sexual sense), or 'correct' roles. Above all, no longer tied to principles of domination, subordination, control, manipulation, coercion, guilt, punishment...

A final word on this marvellous film: I would like to celebrate its generosity. It could so easily have become merely cynical and negative. The film expresses neither disgust nor condemnation toward the gay relationship; neither does it blame the wife for leaving. All the characters are treated with consideration rather than contempt. Superficially, the mother (Anne Meara) might appear the exception: many of the tensions are exacerbated by her hysterical need to 'manage' everything and everyone. By implication, however, I think her position is thoroughly understood: like so many mothers, she has been compensated for her total lack of empowerment beyond the home with the assumption of power within it. She is finally more pathetic than reprehensible. Even Carl, the centre of so much of the film's humour, apparently smug and pretentious (especially in his political commitment to the restoration of an aristocracy to remedy all society's ills), is allowed his moment of grace, the revelation, not only of vulnerability, but of an authentic generosity of his own. One looks forward with the utmost eagerness to Greg Mottola's future work...

When spectres emerge in daylight, they seem much less terrifying than people had thought.



Poison (1991) Haynes' first feature—a study of societal dysfunction and contamination—is indebted to the horror genre.

by Florence Jacobowitz and Richard Lippe

Todd Haynes' *Safe*: Illness as Metaphor in the 90s

As for the 1990s cinema, we are impressed by its diversity. There are films reflecting the continuing maturation of established directors and some fascinating new filmmakers whose achievements convey a sophisticated, expressive use of style and form. Our list of praiseworthy works include Martin Scorsese's *Casino*, Claude Chabrol's *La Cérémonie*, Spike Lee's *Get on the Bus*, Roman Polanski's *Death and the Maiden*, Zhang Yimou's *Shanghai Triad*, Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *Goodbye South, Goodbye* among others.

One of the most provocative films by a relatively young filmmaker recently released, that explores women's identity in the late 20th century, is Todd Haynes' *Safe* (1995). Haynes' body of work thus far includes two features and a number of shorts that evidence the director's concerns with the social pressures of conformity which often are manifested in physical forms. Although Haynes identifies himself as a gay filmmaker, his commitment to exploring oppression and dysfunction extends to other disenfranchised members of society, including children, women as well as gays - those not empowered or able to control their environment and construct a place for

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themselves that allows for self-expression. Many of the characters in Haynes' work feel alienated and displaced in their immediate surroundings. Seemingly familiar, commonplace spaces found within American suburbia become sinister and threatening to their inhabitants.¹

Haynes' attention to space and environment aligns him with a number of post-war European filmmakers including Jean-Luc Godard (*Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle*), Ingmar Bergman (*Persona*), Michelangelo Antonioni (*Red Desert*) - Haynes mentions screening the Antonioni film in preparation for the making of *Safe*. He also says that Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* was an influence on the film.² All of these filmmakers place the protagonists' sense of alienation within particular landscapes. This tradition is not as strongly pronounced in the American cinema; interestingly, a number of European emigrés working within classical Hollywood (Fritz Lang, Otto Preminger, Max Ophüls, Douglas Sirk) presented a critical, ironic view of everyday American life and explore similar issues of social displacement. Among contemporary directors Martin Scorsese continues this tradition and, in a film such as *Taxi Driver*, presents a radical critique of social malaise by inextricably connecting his characters to their environment. Haynes, like Scorsese, brings a critical observant perspective to a distinctly American understanding of contemporary social life and its attendant pressures and demands. Again, like Scorsese, Haynes pays attention to the traditions of American culture and draws from them. *Taxi Driver* employs generic conventions of the Western (John Ford's *The Searchers*) and the horror film to address its concerns. Haynes too draws directly from the horror film (*Poison*) but, even more pointedly, the melodrama, a genre that particularly accommodates the exploration of personal identity within the larger context of social reality and dramatizes the resulting conflicts inevitably produced. Melodrama expresses the ineffable, the attempted protests which cannot find legitimate, concrete expression. Rebellion is often manifested inwardly, as an implosion in the personal realm, exteriorised as illness or breakdown.

Haynes' use of melodrama as a means to comment on the social climate of the 80's links him with the intensified use of the genre in the 50's post-war period. In both decades, one finds a social milieu represented by a surface veneer of stability in the form of family, conformity and suburban existence. In the films of the 50's and 80's, decades of apparent social quiet, danger invariably is connected to an outside threat, as opposed to being found within the idealized community. The 80's indulgence in upscale homes, the obsessively moulded human body and grand scale consumption masks internal discontent and spiritual angst which often leads to a search for gratification outside of immediate material consumerism. The excess of these decades is rooted in a firm belief in the power of money to buy everything, including health and happiness; but, in actuality, this belief functions as a facade papering over unease, doubt, scepticism and a growing sense of a potential disaster.

Michael Tolkin's *The Rapture* is another 90's film which explores the relationship between physical, material indul-

gence and mental and spiritual breakdown.³ And manifestations of cultural tensions and upheaval arise in a number of contemporary horror films, particularly in the works of David Cronenberg where the body becomes a site of decay and the grotesque. Haynes specifically sets *Safe* in the moneyed bourgeois suburbia of the late 80's; significantly, it is at this time that the threat of AIDS extends beyond the gay community and drug users to the population at large. This development undermines the belief in the promised infallible body created through physical exercise, dieting and cosmetic reconstruction. Unlike Cronenberg who fetishizes the body as the ultimate site of horror, Haynes' concerns are with a conformist, consumerist culture and its relation to illness. Haynes' work moves beyond the enclosed Cronenberg world where pleasure in dismemberment becomes an end in itself; Cronenberg also places his oeuvre against a collapsing consumerist world, but his films tend to indulge and emphasize the sensorial aspects of physical pain and deterioration (ironically, giving the film consumer value for his/her money).⁴ In contrast, *Safe* reopens the issue of 80's indulgence and its fetishization of the body and the home, as a means of articulating the uncertainties beginning to emerge. The film doesn't exploit the fear of illness and the fallibility of the body - it places these concerns against a wider network of social determinants which shape identity.

Safe's heroine, Carol White/Julianne Moore, increasingly senses her vulnerability and impending collapse, but cannot place her diminishing well-being because she has every reason to be happy. She is an attractive upper class white woman, living in a palatial home in a wealthy suburban enclave of the San Fernando Valley. She spends her days exercising, lunching with friends, redecorating her home.

As in the tradition of the melodrama, the home, and Carol's bourgeois lifestyle - ideologically promoted as a safe haven, a social place of security and comfort - manifests itself as a place of containment and danger. This is visually underlined through Haynes' mise-en-scène. Carol White is introduced in a methodical, calculated fashion in the first half of the film, through a series of vignettes which become increasingly sinister and threatening in tone. The film begins with a disquieting shot taken at night from behind the windshield in the front seat of a car; the shot is accompanied by ominous music. The car (a Mercedes) then turns into the driveway of a house fronted by a huge iron gate. The film's introductory scene continues with the couple from the car in their bedroom. The woman lies prone and seems detached but is dutiful as her husband has sex with her. The scene serves to inform the viewer that Carol participates in her life one step removed from genuine involvement. And, in quick succession, the film presents a number of disturbing scenes that subtly outline Carol's growing incompatibility with and disengagement from her immediate surroundings. Carol's home is an unsullied, sterile, expansive space kept immaculately clean and orderly. Nothing is out of order in the kitchen and the ever-present Fulvia/Martha Velez-Johnson, the maid, never hears Carol calling her because of the noise of the vacuum cleaner. Carol's routine, rigid, pastel-coloured world is one day invaded by a dark couch, mistakenly delivered to her house in the wrong

colour. Carol's sense of upset (almost alarm) and the energy needed to rectify the situation suggest her inability to deal with confrontation and disorder.

The early manifestations of Carol's alleged environmental allergy are related to ruptures in Carol's conformist and controlled life. Her illness challenges the rigid patterns of her existence, giving her a means of signalling protest or rejection. Carol's physical symptoms speak of her lack of control and inability to cope with contemporary life and social relationships. Underground garages, freeway traffic, toxins and chemicals used in everyday conveniences such as dry cleaning combine to create an environment that is stress-producing, unnatural and foreboding.

To illustrate Haynes' methodical alignment of Carol's illness with her estrangement from her familiar and safe world, we will discuss three telling instances. First, the moment that suggests Carol's increasing alienation from her husband, Greg/Xander Berkeley, occurs the morning after they have had a confrontation concerning Carol's rejection of having sex with him because of her headaches. Carol's husband is seen getting ready for work, spraying himself with deodorant and hairspray. Carol breaks the silence with an apology for having felt unwell, and her husband relents and they hug. The moment of conciliation is dramatically interrupted when Carol suddenly vomits. Rationally, Carol is reacting to the excess of toxins her husband has applied to his body in his almost comical morning rituals of grooming, but visually the scene functions to indicate Carol's discontent and estrangement, surfacing in a violent, uncontrolled form.

Secondly, a less graphic but equally forceful sequence occurs soon after when Carol, unable to sleep, gets up late at night and wanders around the grounds. Her late night appearance on the grounds immediately draws the attention of two policemen in a car patrolling the neighborhood for intruders, who question her being there, as does her husband when she reenters the house. Clearly any deviance (a woman does not walk around in her yard at night) is suspect. Visually the scene takes on a hallucinatory quality as Carol is in her nightgown, disconnected from her surroundings, framed by the unnatural lights that illuminate the grounds of the house and then caught by the squad car headlights, as if she is a suspect figure in her own home.

And, third, indications of Carol's illness occur publicly when she is partaking of social activities expected of her gender and class. For instance, she feels out of sorts during an aerobics class (a succinct metaphor of control and conformity as everyone dresses and moves in exact unison, following an instructor's commands) but more tellingly, hyperventilates in the midst of a baby shower for a friend. Haynes carefully constructs the scene in a tension-building manner. Although Carol is among friends in her hostess's home, her tension and discomfort becomes increasingly palpable. The dialogues at the gathering are superficial and commonplace, consisting of hollow niceties and compliments regarding clothing, food preparation and gift wrapping. Carol disengages from the women and tries to focus on the hostess's daughter, but this strategy fails to relieve Carol's mounting stress, which the

child begins to sense. Haynes records the attack with a slow track into Carol's expression of panic as her sense of constriction and airlessness mounts.

The scene, again, reworks the generic conventions from which it draws - the inability to breathe expresses suffocation, metaphorically as well as physically. Carol's lack of an identity reveals itself in her panic and inability to speak. The film systematically places these attacks at precise moments that collectively indicate Carol's rejection of and growing distance from her familiar world, which includes her husband, home, friends and places she regularly frequents such as the beauty parlour, restaurants, the health club and so forth. Carol loses her place in the world and a feeling that she is estranged increasingly becomes a reality for her.

Carol's inability to speak for herself is heightened in contexts of male dominance and control. This is particularly evident in scenes where Carol is asked to account for her symptoms and outbreaks of illness. When Carol's family practitioner fails to locate a physical explanation for Carol's reactions, he suggests they might be triggered psychologically and recommends a psychiatrist. The scene with the psychiatrist illustrates Carol's hesitation and uncertainty when she is asked to define who she is and what bothers her. In response, the psychiatrist frames Carol's illness in terms of questions in identity: "We need to be hearing from you - What's going on in you?"

Carol's most independent and active attempt to help herself occurs when she writes away for information on environmental illness, a concern that begins to preoccupy her thinking; she describes herself as having a "pretty normal upbringing" and being "basically healthy and suddenly finding myself being sick." As she writes, Carol is interrupted by her husband who questions her and consequently intimidates Carol, undermining her decision to write the letter. Carol's response is defensive - she begins to become verbally hesitant and disoriented, asking herself "Oh God, What is this? Where am I, right now?" and starts to sob. The scene is both touching and disturbing as it reinforces Carol's entrapment. Her attempt to define herself and consciously ask for help is blocked, and as a result, Carol lacks control, a voice, empowerment. Yet, while she is most often acquiescent and child-like, ironically, it is her illness that ultimately forces her to begin to assert herself and articulate her true feelings.

Carol White is an ideal example of a melodramatic figure as defined by Peter Brooks who claims that melodrama is characterised by muteness.⁵ As Carol retreats from contemporary social life in the latter half of the film, searching for a safe haven at a New-age retreat, Wrenwood, she begins to make small incursions towards finding her own voice and making a place for herself in the world. But while Wrenwood is outside of Carol's familiar social environment, it is not as self-contained or hermetically sealed from social hierarchies as it initially appears to be. The director of Wrenwood, Peter Dunning/Peter Friedman, another patriarchal bourgeois figure, runs the retreat as a profit-making institution and is reluctant to suggest that Carol's illness may be a response to an oppressive social world. Although Peter and his staff stress

that the outside world is full of pollution, his credo is "Heal thyself", which deflects blame back onto the individual. This attitude is the inverse of the more familiar notion that cures are found through science or medicine. The recommendation to ignore the social content of one's life is untenable and leads Carol eventually to an existence in a tiny porcelain encased tomb-like bubble hut.

What Wrenwood offers Carol is the opportunity to distance her from her familiar role and activities so that she can re-examine who she is and what she desires; and, within this context, she does manage tentatively to explore herself. Carol befriends a young male resident, Chris/James LeGros, and the experience contributes to her gradually moving toward the moment where she can look at her own image, reflected in a mirror, and say "I love you. I really love you. I love you." (Claiming this as an independent act is qualified in that a staff member at Wrenwood, Claire/Kate McGregor Stewart, has told Carol earlier that she regained her sense of self through declarations of love to her mirror image. The moment is also qualified as Haynes has shadows partially cover Carol's face). Clearly, Haynes leaves the ending highly tenuous. Carol's tentative attempt to like herself and articulate this self-acceptance is an achievement and needs to be seen in contrast to the isolated spectre in the ski mask and body suit who haunts the Wrenwood landscape. This figure represents an extreme manifestation of someone who cannot trust and has become incapable of any interaction whatever. At the same time, Carol's attempt to express self-confidence takes place in a constricting, solitary, capsule-like space. The film concludes with a cut from Carol's shadow-covered face to black, leaving the viewer with an ambiguous ending. Haynes offers no solution but he has presented a serious critique of an emasculating culture that privileges the aggressive empowered few who exploit its potential at a great cost to the more vulnerable members of society.

In *Safe*, the Carol White character is the film's emotional centre and identification with her position is essential to Haynes' concerns. On the one hand, Julianne Moore gives a remarkable empathetic performance and embodies Carol White in a credible and authentic manner. While it is clear that Moore's interpretation of the character matches Haynes' conception, the relation between performance and characterization is complicated by the director's stylistics and presentation of his heroine as a victim. Haynes' visuals are highly controlled and primarily function to keep the viewer at a distance—the images are formal and carefully composed and Carol is often treated as a subject under scrutiny. This presentation tends to undercut the viewer's commitment to the character and particularly so in those scenes in which she appears to be emblematic of the ridiculous, superficial aspects of contemporary culture. These scenes can be read as encouraging the viewer to take the film as a black comedy and, to a degree, the director allows for such an interpretation; but, ultimately, Haynes produces a subtle and nuanced work that demands empathy with its heroine. If the viewer merely regards Carol as a lost bourgeois housewife who becomes hysterical over the colour of a couch, one misses both the film's pathos and its

function as a bold political statement. The film's intentions extend beyond the post-modern notion of parody as an end in itself. And, while it is possible to argue that Haynes overindulges his presentation of Carol as a victim, never allowing her to escape the role during the course of the film and, hence, making it appear that victimization is what she is about, it is nevertheless important to see that his primary intention is to present a critique of a post-feminist society that remains oppressive to women.

As we have said, *Safe* is a film in which subject matter, characterization and style are connected in a highly concentrated manner. For instance, Haynes uses repetitive images to connect Carol's established society and Wrenwood which to an extent mirrors the world outside it. Just as the film begins with a shot taken from behind the windshield of a car, the approach to Wrenwood is presented in the exact same manner although in this instance Carol is a passenger in a taxi cab. Later, Carol is seen alone at night on the porch of her Wrenwood hut hesitantly singing to herself; the shot evokes the earlier image of Carol at night in the grounds of her San Fernando Valley home. These parallel images undercut any simple acceptance of Wrenwood as the safe haven Carol wants to think it represents. Carol may be moving towards finding a voice, but the film doesn't suggest that there is a social context where the voice can be heard. The director's vision is dark and highly guarded – a world that is full of toxins and poisons remains.

Safe belongs to a series of audacious films that re-examine women's identities in the 90s. As do the women in *Thelma and Louise*, *The Rapture* and *Alien 3*, Carol White, in a very literal manner, moves beyond her familiar society, and in the process, her body, like the space she inhabits, becomes increasingly unadorned. This paring down of social excess is presented as a necessary step towards self-examination. While none of these works offers its heroines life-affirming alternatives, the films' sombre conclusions can be read as a form of protest. And *Thelma and Louise*, in a most extravagant and celebratory fashion, defiantly suggests that driving off a cliff is preferable to life within the status quo. Todd Haynes' *Safe*, with its intelligent usage of the tradition of the melodrama genre, is a significant contribution to contemporary cinema, reminding the viewer that women's identity and place within the world still need to be defined and fought for.

1. Haynes' short film *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987) and his first feature *Poison* (1991) both present the American suburbs as a bleak, life-negating environment.

2. See "antibodies (Larry Gross talks with *Safe*'s Todd Haynes)" *Filmmaker*, Summer 1995, pp. 39-45

3. Michael Tolkin addresses similar concerns in *The New Age* (1994). For a detailed reading of *The Rapture*, see Florence Jacobowitz's article "The Rapture: A Woman's Film of the 90's", *CineAction* Issue No. 29 1992.

4. David Lynch's films offer a variant of the thematic of the grotesque within everyday life. As for David Cronenberg and *Dead Ringers*, see Florence Jacobowitz and Richard Lippe, "Dead Ringers: The Joke's on Us", *CineAction* Issue No. 16 May 1989.

5. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976.

by Robert K. Lightning

What's Love Got To Do With It?

The Resilience of the Woman's Film

IN YEARS TO COME THE 90S MAY BE CELEBRATED FOR THE RENAISSANCE OF THE woman's film in U.S. cinema. I say this recognizing fully that the genre's incipient rebirth has been heralded periodically since at least the 1940s. Still, thus far, the 90s have contributed an impressive list of studio and independent productions, including *What's Love Got To Do With It?*, *Household Saints*, *Safe*, and *The Rapture*. We can add to this a noteworthy group that either "re"-centers typically male-centred narratives (*Thelma and Louise*, *Set It Off*) or inflects them from a strongly feminist viewpoint (*Bulletproof Heart*). There have also been less inspired woman-centred productions, as well as interesting investigations of girlhood (*Crooklyn*, *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, *A Little Princess*).

This paper has 2 purposes:

1. To show through an examination of one of the current cycle's exemplary efforts, *What's Love Got To Do With It?* (1993), the thorough grounding of the cycle in the concerns of the classical woman's film.

2. As I think this essay will demonstrate, the current cycle of films, while expanding on classical themes individually, as a whole does not go significantly further than classical Hollywood. My second purpose is to explore the cultural implication of this apparent developmental block.

We might begin with a brief, preliminary examination of another 90s text, one justly celebrated by critics, *The Rapture* (1991). Critic Florence Jacobowitz has already drawn attention (*CineAction* 29 (1992)) to its "classical era" components, not the least being its centring on a transcendent star performance, here by Mimi Rogers. If we evoke an exemplary text of the classical era, *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948), the resilience of classical themes becomes easier to examine.

Letter can be divided into 3 main sections which together are framed by a prologue and epilogue. The 3 sections are distinguished by each being introduced (following Lisa/Joan Fontaine's narration) by the voice of an offscreen personage who will oversee the channelling of Lisa's considerable energies into acceptable social expression: mother, employee, and husband, representing respectively the social institutions of the bourgeois home, the workplace, and marriage. We in turn can appropriate these institutions as categories for a comparison of the 2 films.





All stills from *What's Love Got To Do With It?*

The bourgeois home

This category is the most difficult to connect to *The Rapture*: It is in fact the absence of extended family that partly defines Sharon's disturbing isolation. The bourgeois home functions in part to socialize the daughter through regulating her social and sexual engagement: It is for the purposes of restricting the former and directing the latter that is the hidden meaning behind the mother's opening comments in respectively the Vienna and Linz portions of *Letter's* first section. Despite the absence of family, Sharon still betrays her indoctrination to the tenets of the bourgeois home through the behavioural changes that express her "conversion". If a restricted social engagement is not a symptom of her "rebirth", sexual reserve is, as is signalled by her sudden modesty before a former fellow swinger (Patrick Bachau). We should also note the first sign of Sharon's desire for spiritual change, her obsessive cleaning of body and boudoir, a clear expression of the customs of the bourgeois home.

The workplace

From its opening scene in a sterile office space (see also the Jacobowitz article) to its massacre-in-the workplace, *The Rapture* is unparalleled in its depiction of an alienated labor force. The dehumanizing effect upon Sharon is realized in the direction: in the office scenes Rogers is repeatedly reduced to head shots by Michael Tolkin's direction. (In a striking parallel, in her "liberating" after-work activities she is again appreciated merely for her anatomical presence). As a representation of "pink collar" labor the telephone operator recurs frequently in the cinema, the reduction of Woman to formless voice. In a noteworthy parallel, Lisa's profession as model reduces her to a voiceless form.

Marriage

As a social form, marriage is by design the surest regulator of adult female energies, perpetuating the norms already instilled by the bourgeois home. Both films suggest it as the inevitable last stop for women as a result of both conditioning and social pressure: Sharon gravitates to marriage for moral reasons and Lisa capitulates for economic reasons but the result is the regulation of both women's sexuality and the culturally determined prioritizing of their emotional commitments.

Both films are exemplary in presenting the objective realities of the social forms that dominate women's lives. It could be argued that neither Sharon's experience of marriage nor Lisa's of work is overwhelmingly oppressive. However, this is precisely where the most striking parallel emerges: The willing commitment of the heroine to certain patriarchal capitalist institutions is mere pragmatism on her part, the result of her greater commitment to a supreme patriarchal figure (God and Stefan Brandt respectively), a commitment that results from social conditioning, Lisa's by Oedipal relations and Sharon's by Judeo-Christian ideology.

Before going on I must acknowledge a debt to the writing of the late Andrew Britton, specifically his essay *A New Servitude* (*CineAction* 26/27 (1992), pp.32-59), which seems to me a landmark in woman's film studies. I will refer to it in the following text both frequently and extensively.

THE FREUDIAN-FEMINIST MELODRAMA

Certain features of *What's Love* are common to what Thomas Elsaesser has labeled the "Freudian-feminist melodrama" (Elsaesser, *Tales of Sound and Fury*) a subset of the woman's film initiated by Hitchcock's *Rebecca* in 1940 and continuing through such outstanding examples as *Gaslight*, *Undercurrent* and *Caught*. Commonly recurring features are already established in the Hitchcock: a young woman, a sexual as well as social innocent, meets and marries a stranger strongly coded as both a romantic and sexual ideal. As Andrew Britton notes

"The crucial point, however, is that the heroine's motive for falling in love invariably derives from a fantasy of release, fulfilment, and liberation which she projects onto the man—liberation from a traumatic past (*Gaslight*), from an oppressive family (*Suspicion*), from the demeaning social role of "old maid" (*Undercurrent*), from economic dependency and exploitation (*Rebecca*, *Caught*), from the sense that she is sexually unattractive, and thus that she is "not the sort of girl men marry", as Joan Fontaine puts it in *Rebecca*." (p.38)

But despite her husband's apparent "guarantee (dashing, urbane and glamorous as he is) of a completely unanticipated, and virtually fabulous, new life of freedom and sexual pleasure" the marriage proves anything but ideal. The body of the narrative concerns itself with the heroine's gradual discovery that her fantasy of release is matched by her husband's corresponding fantasy of containment, a fantasy at which she is the center. For the husband too is trying to escape the past, a past in which his castration fears have been severely awakened by a traumatic experience, in two of the genre's finest examples (*Rebecca* and *Gaslight*), by an encounter with a magnificently potent woman. The actual trauma may vary, but crucially, for the husband, the foundation upon which patriarchal heterosexual relations are built—sexual difference—has been fundamentally disturbed and the bride must assuage his castration fears by adopting a position of submission and prostration. Insofar as she cannot completely contain her natural energies she aggravates the wound of castration and the threatening outburst of male anger becomes a recurring feature of marital relations.

It is ample testimony to their potency that as late as *Marnie*, Hitchcock himself could still work variations on the narrative and thematic materials of the genre. Their potency is still in evidence in 1993: *What's Love* transfers certain elements unchanged. Again we have the socially inexperienced heroine: Tina (known as Anna Mae at this point) has in fact traveled to "the city" after spending her entire life in the rural South. Like the Venice of *Summertime*, St. Louis has a certain romantic mythology that, within the narrative, is given additional symbolic connotations as a space where heterosexual norms operate *in extremis*. It is thus the appropriate space for the heroine's sexual education. As embodied by the romantic figure Ike Turner/Laurence Fishburne presents on

stage, heterosexuality promises an escape not only from an uneventful past but from a potentially oppressive future: The formerly oppressed mother (Jennifer Lewis) with whom the now teen-aged Tina (Angela Bassett) will live, is now (having escaped an abusive domestic situation herself) monstrously oppressive herself, promising to contain Tina sexually (the mother explicitly claims the right to be "the *only* sinner in this house") and (anticipating Ike) exploit her financially. In a moment that recalls *Rebecca*, where the heroine's services are literally proffered by her employer Mrs. Van Hopper ("You're a capable child in many ways") to her future husband, Tina's value as a commodity is literally realized when Ike offers her mother cash in exchange for Tina's services as a singer.

Leaving aside for the moment the husband's traumatic past, one of the strategies employed by the Freudian-feminist melodrama for its demystification of heterosexual romance is the elimination or subversion of romantic imagery. The cycle is noteworthy for the absence of weddings or their reduction to the barest legal formalities or narrative data (eg. the weddings in *Rebecca* and *Suspicion* are performed by a justice of the peace and the latter takes place in the rain). In a complete subversion of bourgeois ceremony and custom, Ike proposes in a hospital room *after* Tina has given birth to the couple's first child. The proposal is additionally a tactic to lure Tina (recuperating from severe anemia after the birth) back on stage. As for the wedding itself, it is performed in a place that advertises its ability to perform "quick 10-minute nuptials". Finally, the most lasting image from the wedding is that of the still sickly Tina running after Ike as he "playfully" drives away, threatening to leave her in Mexico.

Marriage is the chief concern of the cycle and the reduction of romantic imagery only aids in focussing attention on bourgeois marriage itself, particularly the dynamics of the bourgeois home. Thus the significance to the cycle of "the house", site of the films' greatest dramatic tensions and the distillation of the patriarchal oppression of women to its essence in the norms of bourgeois marriage: The division of labor, the entrapment of the woman in the home, the masculine domination of marriage's sexual and economic components. The house is a resonant symbol throughout the cycle, inherited from the genre's source in both *Jane Eyre* (Thornfield Hall) and the American gothic as exemplified in Poe. If *What's Love* modifies the familiar imagery of "the house" ("archaic, marmorial, labyrinthine...") its dramatic and thematic relevance remains. Thus it is in the home that we first witness Ike's physical abuse of Tina. As Britton notes of the house and its secrets

...the films use the metaphor of persecution to identify the husband's project with a process of systematic, socially organised and socially legitimated disempowerment. The effect of the process is the heroine's confinement to the house, where a wife ought naturally to be, and where her predicament is therefore invisible... it is precisely the identification of women with "the private sphere" that allows the persecution of the heroine to proceed. (p.40)



What's Love subjects the symbolic sphere to modification while not challenging its basic function. Thus Ike's abuse is in fact not entirely secret: we are shown the frightened faces of both the female members of the musical revue as well as those of Ike's children while Tina is subjected to the most gruelling pummelling. The effect is to clarify and extend one of the basic premises of the woman's oppression: her economic dependency. As all the witnesses to Ike's abuse are (like Tina) financially dependent upon him their silence is guaranteed.

The public/private sphere dichotomy is subjected to further modification in *What's Love* while again not contradicting its original use. This is exemplified in the diner scene where Ike makes a very public display of his power (he shoves a slice of cake into Tina's face) in response to Tina's first independent recording success. Perhaps the closest parallel from the cycle is Ingrid Bergman's emotional distress and public breakdown at a concert in Cukor's *Gaslight*. The wife's public humiliation, while different in the two films, is in no way contradictory. Boyer subjects Bergman to public humiliation to establish incontrovertibly the necessity to restrict her to the private sphere. The effect of Tina's humiliation is to establish publicly the incontrovertible fact of her complicity in her own oppression (after the abuse, she promptly returns to her seat beside Ike). The final effect in both films (and testament to the ploy's

success) is to limit the interference of outsiders.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the cycle is the heroine's complicity in her own entrapment: For the first half of *Suspicion*, Lina/Joan Fontaine adamantly refuses to hear any criticism of her husband/Cary Grant despite the mounting evidence against him; In *Gaslight* when Joseph Cotten at last invades the house it becomes clear under questioning that Bergman, on a not quite unconscious level, is perfectly aware of her husband's nightly activities. Tina's complicity then is not unique. Britton offers this insight

...the point of the entire cycle is that— she [the heroine] is exemplary for the passion and intensity with which she has internalised the desires, fantasies and ambitions which the culture encourages her to have. If she is her husband's victim it is because she has been schooled to be his good and dutiful wife, and if she becomes the object of his violence it is because she is *supposed* to think of herself as the object of his love (ibid.,p.41)

One could hardly ask for a more accurate account of Tina Turner than this and if I undertake at this time an attempt to expand upon it, it is only to note the ways in which *What's Love* expands upon its generic roots.

Mothers and Daughters

"I had a talk with Mother Elizabeth. She is so sweet and good. A saint on earth. I love her dearly. It may be sinful of me but I love her better than my own mother. Because she always understands, even before you say a word... All the same, I don't think she was so understanding this time. I told her I wanted to be a nun. I explained how sure I was of my vocation, that I had prayed to the Blessed Virgin to make me sure, and to find me worthy...I said I knew as surely as I knew I was kneeling there, that the Blessed Virgin had smiled and blessed me with her consent. But Mother Elizabeth told me I must be more sure...She said, if I was so sure, then I wouldn't mind putting myself to a test by going home after I graduated, and living as other girls lived, going out to parties and dances and enjoying myself... I never dreamed Holy Mother would give me such advice! I was really shocked. I said, of course, I would do anything she suggested, but I knew it was simply a waste of time... That was in the winter of senior year. Then in the spring something happened to me. Yes, I remember. I fell in love with James Tyrone and was so happy for a time."

The preceding was extracted from Mary Tyrone's final speech in O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, arguably the most devastating account of the nuclear family in American literature. In it O'Neill makes use of a familiar metaphor for girlhood (*The Garden of Allah*, *The Sound of Music*), the convent or girl's school. The girl's school works well as a symbol of the pre-Oedipal phase of womanhood, a period when a woman's active and passive sexual components are still in evidence and the central figure of the phase is the mother. The total absence of men is the prime indicator of the subversion of the patriar-



chal order. Additionally, the mystical world of nuns seems to hold the promise (for the pre-Oedipal girl) of the possible continuance of this woman-centred world into adulthood. It is in fact the beloved central figure of Mary's memory, Mother Elizabeth, that directs her *from* the idyll, a nun's ultimate commitment to "the Father" being a perfect metaphor for the mother's commitment to patriarchy's dominant sexual norms. Significantly, the daughter regards this surprising turn of events with skepticism ("I never dreamed Holy Mother would give me such advice!").

The privileged position of Mary's speech (it closes the play) suggests that for O'Neill the events recalled are pivotal to the family horrors detailed earlier, including Mary's drug addiction. For Mary the memory of this lost world is even stronger than that of the inception of heterosexual romance. Mary's journey into the patriarchal order is all the more poignant as it is recalled as due to mere chance rather than overwhelming social pressures.

I will turn now to an extract from Michael Schneider's insightful synthesis of Freud and Marx, *Neurosis and Culture* (The Seabury Press, 1975). It begins with a quote from Freud:

The child takes both of its parents, and more particularly one of them, as the object of its erotic wishes. In so doing, it usually follows some indication from its parents, whose affection bears the closest characteristics of sexual activity, even though one that is inhibited in its aims. As a rule, the father prefers his daughter and a mother her son; the child reacts to this by wishing, if he is a son, to take his father's place, and, if she is a daughter, her father's [sic].

Schneider continues

Here Freud at least allowed the possibility that the child does not select the parent of the opposite sex as the preferred (Oedipal) love object of its own volition but "follows some indication from its parents." Oedipal rivalry as a basis for an exclusive claim to the love object of the opposite sex therefore appears to be less a primary action on the part of the child than a secondary reaction to the (Oedipal) preferential treatment of a child of the opposite sex by its parents... (Schneider then adds)... The social obstruction and taboo of homosexual eroticism necessarily has as a consequence the parents perceiving as "offensive" their erotic efforts towards the child of the same sex and therefore they subject it to a special form of censorship and repression. The social ostracism and repression of homosexuality is therefore one of the main reasons for the special turning of the parents towards the child of the opposite sex. (pg. 90).

Schneider's assessment of the Oedipus complex (part correction of, part expansion upon Freud) permits, I think, further interpretation. I would like to suggest two conclusions that seem to me to derive logically from Schneider:

1) The Oedipus complex does not in the strictest sense "produce" heterosexual object choice: It is merely an instrument for the perpetuation of social and sexual norms that pre-

cede its individual manifestations. If this seems to be stating the obvious it is only to facilitate the reader's (provisional) acceptance of the next proposition. Clearly, the parents here function as agents (and victims) of the social order to which they themselves have been fully socialised. Having internalized the dominant sexual norms of the culture, their own social interaction with their children precipitates heterosexual object choice.

2) If, as Schneider notes, the cultural censure of homosexuality is a dynamic component of social relations within the nuclear family, then this censorship contributes to the child's Oedipal rivalry with the same sex parent. Put another way, it is the same sex parent's censure of the child's *natural* homosexual affection (deriving as it does from constitutional bisexuality) that is a contributor—perhaps the *primary* contributor—to the child's exclusive heterosexual object choice. The child's *subjective* experience of love's censure is inevitably one of *rejection* and logically results in antagonism (in the form of rivalry) toward the "rejecting" parent. This opens the possibility that same sex rivalry *precedes* object choice rather than vice versa.

The formula "same sex parental rejection produces exclusive heterosexual object choice" has been repeatedly suggested in the cinema (and as I have tried to suggest, in the O'Neill) and if I cite primarily the work of two directors, Ophuls and Hitchcock, it is a matter of pure opportunism: The distinctiveness of their work is not likely to be questioned by most readers. If additionally I focus on the mother-daughter relationship it is not only because of its relevance to *What's Love*: The lost possibility of same sex love is inevitably more disastrous for the daughter as her loss cannot be mitigated by the myriad manifestations of patriarchal power that the son is heir to once socialisation has been completed.

Although the formula often occurs in the cinema it is not always subject to detailed exposition, it is often reduced to the film's acknowledgement that the dissolution of the mother/daughter bond is the pivotal action that leads to the daughter's initiation into heterosexual relations. The breakup can be initiated with the mother or daughter, or derive from circumstances within the narrative that function as metaphor for the actual social process. In Ophuls' *La Signora di Tutti*, Gaby Doriot/Isa Miranda's mother has been dead for some time and she forms a strong emotional attachment to a wealthy matron (whose son loves Gaby). A metaphorical Oedipus triangle is initiated when Gaby is pursued by the woman's husband. The start of heterosexual relations (Gaby is about to meet with the father in secret) is preceded by the mother's increasingly hysterical realization that Gaby has (literally and figuratively) abandoned her. At the very moment Gaby is about to commit to "the father" (by kissing him) "the mother" falls down a flight of stairs and dies.

In the middle section of Ophuls' *Le Plaisir* ("Tellier House") the Roman Catholic rite of first communion becomes a metaphor for the social process whereby children accede to their adult gender roles. During the ceremony the children are separated according to gender, boys to the left, and girls to the right. The symbolic nature of the ceremony is much stressed, the girls' attire (they wear veils) in particular evoking the mar-

riage ceremony. For the congregation and visitors, the ceremony provides the opportunity to reflect and mourn the loss of youthful innocence and (given Ophuls' use of the event as metaphor), the lost promise of adult sexual relations (both men and women are in tears by the conclusion). The preceding night, Madame Tellier's niece (whose communion she and her prostitute employees have come to attend) is found in tears by one of the prostitutes, Madame Rosa/Danielle Darrieux. Perhaps intuiting the loss the rite will entail, the girl is in distress about the coming event. Madame Rosa spends the night in bed with the girl to comfort her. For the girl a temporary restoration of the mother-daughter bond is achieved just prior to her initiation into the patriarchal order. For the woman, intimacy with another woman is temporarily allowed, an intimacy made impossible by her entrapment in compulsory heterosexual relations. As the opening track around the brothel makes clear, the prostitutes (and by extension, all women) are separated into individual compartments by heterosexual engagement.

The most thorough presentation of the formula occurs in *Lola Montes*, specifically the segment devoted to the teenaged Lola's engagement to an elderly baron. Like *La Signora* the film is an exposition of the events in a woman's life as she herself reflects upon them. Once again the dissolution of the bond to the mother proves the critical event that projects the daughter into heterosexuality. It is to Gaby Doriot's credit that she recognises her loss: When she returns to the scene of the mother's death, she places flowers before her portrait, making of it a shrine. This of course is also her tragedy: Gaby's guilt over this death is clearly a factor contributing to her eventual suicide. Lola on the other hand follows the familiar Oedipal path, becoming the mother's rival.

Ophuls finds the perfect metaphor for socialization as a *process* in Lola's voyage to Europe: Lola begins the trip as a sexual innocent and ends by running off with her mother's lover. The voyage is literally a voyage into heterosexuality. As in *Le Plaisir*, the young woman is miserable at the prospect. For Lola, her grief is experienced principally in terms of her separation from her mother. Rarely has the child's subjective experience of the censure of the homosexual impulse been so clearly presented as rejection. As Lola discovers, the mother has not only bartered Lola away to an elderly man, but has done so in part to allow for her own unfettered sexual engagement with a young lieutenant. For Lola, the voyage involves the gradual discovery of the mother's preference of heterosexuality to same sex intimacy with the daughter, and the first indication is appropriately, the mother's lie about the availability of double berths (which mother and daughter would ordinarily share). It is crucial then, that it is with the mother's young lover that Lola elopes: If, as in Freud, Oedipal rivalry is initiated by the daughter's desire to possess the father, rivalry would have been bypassed and Lola would have married the baron, a more obvious father figure. Lola is motivated by a desire for revenge for the mother's betrayal and this determines object choice. In this schema the young lieutenant (as he is the mother's possession) becomes the principal father figure.

Most significant is the film's recognition that the breakup of this primary relationship colors all future sexual relations. Thus, in the scene where Lola publicly exposes her affair with a married man (musical director of her dance troupe) Lola is motivated by revenge upon *both* parent figures. She exposes "the father" because he has kept secret the existence of "the mother" (he had told Lola that he was divorced) and thus disallowed one of Lola's chief pleasures in heterosexual relations: revenge on the mother. The exposure of the affair, of course, humiliates the wife publicly (behind Lola's guise of female solidarity) and achieves these ends. For Lola the most damning thing "the mother" can do is to admit she has failed to recognize the daughter's rivalry (as the wife does here when she declares "I do not know you").

Examples can be found in Hitchcock, a director who repeatedly returns to the subject of women's socialisation (*Rebecca*, *Shadow of a Doubt*) and their experience of heterosexuality. *Stage Fright* is explicitly concerned with an investigation of Woman (as represented by the figure of Charlotte Inwood/Marlene Dietrich) but is implicitly an examination of women's experience of heterosexuality (as suggested by the question Charlotte poses early in the film "Why do women marry abominable men?"). In her final scene (the setting of which strongly suggests the witness stand or confessional) Charlotte at last reveals her secrets

"When I give all my love and get back treachery and hatred, it's... it's as if my mother had struck me in the face."

At the moment of her defeat by patriarchal forces, Charlotte can tacitly admit the nature of female heterosexual desire: Heterosexual love was meant to compensate for and replace the intense bond of mother to daughter and the failure of heterosexual love immediately recalls the intensity of that original loss.

In *Vertigo*, Hitchcock suggests that the mother's rejection is at the root of Judy's involvement in a murder plot. In her hotel room she shows Scottie two photos, one of her late father and another of her and her mother. She also admits "My mother married again, but I didn't like the guy". Again we have the daughter's rejection by the mother aligned to heterosexuality: Judy's total access to the mother (since the father's death) was thwarted by the mother's remarriage. For Judy, Gavin Elster's murder plot provides the paradigm of a revenge fantasy, one in which the mother/wife is eliminated. That Judy remains passionately devoted to "the mother" is suggested not only by her attempt to prevent the actual enactment of the fantasy (her race up the bell tower) but her retention of Madeleine's grey suit, figuratively, the mother's clothes (compare Gaby and her flowers in *La Signora*).

Space does not permit the detailed analysis that *The Birds* and *Marnie* deserve: Arguably, they are Hitchcock's crowning achievement in Hollywood. It is worth noting that in the former, Hitchcock undertakes the task of mending the bond between mother and daughter (as in *La Signora* represented by the relationship between the heroine and her lover's mother), the film ending with the heroine's rejection of heterosexual



love (Melanie's passive refusal to partake of Mitch's symbolic offer of brandy) and the tentative (though intensely realised) bonding of two women. As if following a line of inquiry, Hitchcock in *Marnie* examines the overwhelming patriarchal forces (fought by the daughter, internalised by the mother) that dictate the repression of the mother's love for her daughter.

The opening segment of *What's Love* provides an almost point by point exposition of the formula. Structurally analogous to a prologue, the segment presents the young Tina/Rae'von Kelly engaged in a passionate performance during a choir rehearsal. In short order she is thrust from the church because of that passion and upon returning home discovers her mother in the process of abandoning the home. The opening provides one of those unobtrusive narrative realisations of a psychological process of which classical Hollywood seemed such a master. The obvious analogy for Tina's passionate singing is the little girl's experience of phallic sexuality which, prior to socialisation, is undifferentiated from the male's. Here the girl's active sexuality literally provokes the mother figure's censure (explicitly in the name of The Father) when the matronly choir director/Virginia Capers castigates Tina for her "gyrating" and then directs her out of the Father's house. The relation to socialisation is clear: The female child's active sexual component (which, like the boy's, takes as its first object the mother) must be repressed and failing that, she is labelled transgressive and ejected from the patriarchal social order. Tina's victory is short lived: returning home she discovers the real mother leaving. To the child Tina, her defiance of one mother has driven another away. As in other examples cited, the mother's heterosexuality is the chief determinant, although here she is escaping from its confines. Most significantly the film suggests that the loss of the mother results in an internalisation of social mores: It is Tina herself who now symbolically represses her natural sexual drives when she encloses a chirping cricket in her fist. The mother's departure corresponds closely to Freud's comments on melancholia which he later develops into a general description of object loss:

We succeeded in explaining the painful disorder of melancholia by supposing that [in those suffering from it] an object which was lost has been set up again inside the ego that is, that an object-cathexis has been replaced by an identification (Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, trans. Joan Riviere, revised and ed. by James Strachey, W.W. Norton & Co., 1989, p.23)

We might risk here a corresponding statement concerning Tina's sexuality: Having lost the mother as object, Tina now comes to identify with her sexually, that is as a heterosexual woman (while remaining quite different from her personally).

The immediate consequences of the mother's departure—that is, Tina being taken in by her grandmother—bring to mind Freud's description of the super-ego as "the carrier of the tradition, of all timeless values which have been handed on over the generations." It is appropriate then that

Tina's domestic training is conducted by an actual representative of the past.

Her domestic training complete, Tina now must submit to a sexual education and it is here that *What's Love* varies the formula, for Tina (unlike Lola Montes) enters the realm of heterosexual relations not as the mother's rival but to *regain* the mother's love in the form of the mother's approval: As Tina's transgression once drove the mother away, her obedience promises to restore the mother's love once Tina defines herself unmistakably as heterosexual. She proceeds then to follow the mother's directives and one of her first is "Go on Anna Mae, put on a dress". She also directs her to the Club Royale. If St. Louis represents the realities of gender relations, the Club Royale represents their fantasy enactment: The *mise en scène* when Tina first enters—panning camera, the precision choreography of the dancers, etc.—immediately evokes the Hollywood musical. The fantasy in fact is of an energized and fulfilling sexual engagement, complete with a space (the stage) for the release of Woman's pent-up phallic energy.

The film gives a very precise illustration of the parent's function as gender role model for the child. Thereafter it is under her mother's intermittent direction that Tina's life with Ike is conducted. I have already mentioned the mother's barter of Tina to Ike. Later, when Tina discovers Ike's infidelities it is the mother who ameliorates the issue ("Oh child, he's just being a man!"). As the mother's interests are basically financial her allegiance is easily bought. Thus when Tina finally attempts to leave the marriage and proposes to seek refuge with the mother, this vital secret is eventually betrayed by the mother to Ike, as he had prior to this purchased a house for her. This betrayal marks a crucial moment in Tina's relation to heterosexuality. It is immediately followed by the "Proud Mary" sequence which is characterized (as, by implication, is the marriage) by repetitiveness ("Rolling, rolling, rolling on a river!") and monotony, its one unforgettable image is of Tina spinning mechanically and blankly on stage. The love for which Tina aligned herself to heterosexuality has proved impossible to regain (compare *Marnie*) from the woman conditioned to patriarchal sexual norms. It is the last time we see the mother in the film.

The Impresario

For one gets an impression that the simple Oedipus complex is by no means its commonest form, but rather represents a simplification...Closer study usually discloses the more complete Oedipus complex, which is two fold, positive and negative, and is due to the bisexuality originally present in children: That is to say, a boy has not merely an ambivalent attitude towards his father and an affectionate object-choice towards his mother, but at the same time he also behaves like a girl and displays an affectionate feminine attitude to his father and a corresponding jealousy and hostility toward his mother. (Freud, p.23)

Part of the greatness of *What's Love* is that it gives the viewer a capsule version of the male equivalent to the socialization process I have outlined. The components are all there in Ike's

account of his father's lingering death in a hospital: the child's subjective experience of the loss (of the same sex parent-as-object choice) as rejection (evidenced by the adult Ike's still bitter attitude toward the father); the parent's allegiance to the dominant sexual norms of heterosexuality (the father was killed in retribution for his affair with a "gangster's woman") which, as interpreted by Ike, he placed before his same sex affection for the child; and finally the effect of this loss on present sexual relations. (It is the attempted suicide of Ike's current wife that has provoked memories of the father). Significantly, same sex love is so repressed by the socialized adult male, that it is recalled with disgust: Ike's memories are primarily of the sight and stench of the father's decaying body (he also now has a "phobia" about hospitals). This trauma links Ike to the persecuting husbands of the Freudian-feminist melodramas, and (as with those heroines) Tina is subjected to a project meant to assuage the male's fears, in this case Ike's permanent sense of being abandoned.

That I think more needs to be said about Ike Turner and the male Oedipus is perhaps obvious from the quotation that begins this section. It is followed very shortly by this Freudian admission

It may even be that the ambivalence displayed in the relations to the parents should be attributed entirely to bisexuality and that it is not, as I have represented above, developed out of identification in consequence of rivalry (Freud, p.29)

This seems ample testimony that Freud, even late in his career (the complete text is from 1923) could still not quite reconcile the revolutionary concept of constitutional bisexuality to the culture of which he was both critic and fully socialized member. A bit earlier Freud describes the boy child's "simple positive Oedipus complex" where the child comes to identify with the father and take the mother as object choice. One might reasonably ask even in its simple form, what happens to the boy's feminine identity. The following is not meant as an answer, but by examining a character type that appears throughout the cinema (which I have named "the impresario" in honor of the self-inflated role Ike assumes in relation to Tina) we might develop possible lines of inquiry.

The impresario is that male mentor, sponsor, teacher, etc. who takes under his wing a woman as protégée. The direction I intend to take will perhaps be suggested if I note immediately that among the cinema's finest realizations of the type are Waldo Lydecker in *Laura* (1944), Addison de Witt in *All About Eve* (1950) and the James Mason of *The Seventh Veil* (1945). The type's clearest literary ancestor is Svengali, the mesmerizer, in George Du Maurier's *Trilby*. Svengali is regarded by his creator with great ambivalence: On the one hand, he is described in the most offensively racist terms; on the other, he is allowed ironic commentary by Du Maurier upon the deeply ingrained customs of the author's presumed audience, the British bourgeoisie (represented in the novel by the three British ex-patriates in whose Paris studio much of the action evolves). He also functions as the alter ego of Little Billee, the most talented of the three and ultimately the most

repressively bourgeois. Both are present at Trilby's narrative introduction

"Suddenly there came a loud knuckle-rapping at the outer door, and a portentous voice of great volume, and that might almost have belonged to any sex...

It was the figure of a very tall and fully-developed young female, clad in the gray overcoat of a French infantry soldier..." (*Trilby*, George Du Maurier, J.M. Dent & sons Ltd., 1956, p.11)

Thereafter, Svengali and Billee are linked by their similar responses to Trilby: Billee proceeds to fetishize Trilby's foot (the left) and Svengali her voice; for Billee, Trilby becomes a lady and for Svengali, a great singer. Both men attempt to monopolize her sexually, Billee within bourgeois marriage and Svengali by rendering her completely in thrall to the phallus (represented by Du Maurier as both Svengali's penny whistle-like "flexible flageolet" and his sustained, hypnotic stare).

But if Trilby's effect upon Billee suggests that of the muse (he is immediately inspired to paint her foot), her effect upon Svengali, though similar, is profoundly opposite: Svengali *abandons* a potentially promising performing career to devote himself totally to developing the voice of a woman who is profoundly tone-deaf. Trilby becomes famous for her singing as *La Svengali* and as her repertoire includes selections formerly associated with the maestro himself, it becomes increasingly evident that Svengali has made of Trilby *his* voice. We might further deduce that by taking a voice noted for its masculine quality ("an incipient *tenore robusto*") and training it to sing "higher and shriller than any woman had ever sung before" Svengali has made of that voice an instrument for the expression of his own repressed femininity.

The potentially explosive dynamics of such a relationship are fully realized in the texts cited. The impresario is, by conception, a contradictory and ambivalent character. I will examine certain motifs that recur in his various depictions.

Gender ambiguity of the protégée.

Indicators of sexual ambiguity can range from the purely superficial aspects of appearance (Trilby's physique and apparel, Tina's performance and vocal style) to personal qualities that are labelled "masculine" within patriarchy: ambition, aggressiveness, energy. The male's response also varies. Typically her energies provoke his desire to dominate, manipulate or exploit her, to render her (at least in relation to him) "feminine". From Waldo Lydecker to Ike Turner the woman's "boldness" inspires him to (in the words of Eve Harrington) "take charge".

Moreover, *What's Love* suggests that the urge "to conquer" is an indispensable aspect of the impresario's heterosexual impulse. In Ike's original stage routine, ambitious female audience members "audition" onstage before the audience as well as the phallic microphone. When we first witness this routine, none but the last auditionee is acceptable and she mars her performance with girlish screams, almost fainting under Ike's gaze. We are left to assume that she is not chosen because she



presents no challenge: She is only too willing to be subjected to phallic domination.

But one of the defining contradictions of the impresario (as noted) is that his protégée also functions to express his repressed femininity. It might then be proposed that her masculinity both allows for both the heterosexual "challenge" and facilitates his identification with her *as a woman*, identification that would be problematized if she were more feminine (as it would foreground his own despised femininity). I have discussed this feminine identification in relation to Addison de Witt (CineAction 24/25 (1991) in *All About Eve*). Addison's protégées allow him to realize (by proxy) what he most desires: A creative role *within* the theatre. As the only people we see him promote are actors, the role he would like to fill in the theatre is obvious. As the actors are *women* the female identification is equally so.

Freud notes (Freud, p.28) that the relinquishing of the parent of *opposite* sex as love object (as occurs in "normal" Oedipal relations) can increase identification with that parent. Regardless of the source, traces of female identification can be found in even those more insistently heterosexual representatives of the type. In *What's Love* in those scenes devoted to Tina's make-over, Ike's presence is telling. As he oversees her delighted acquisition of all the accoutrements of femininity, one is irresistibly reminded of another film where the male's



repressed femininity haunts the heterosexual romance, Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. As in Hitchcock, the male betrays his femininity even as he constructs his feminine ideal. In one remarkable moment Ike positions himself to admire his image before a mirror, in the exact position held moments before by Tina in a similar attitude.

The impresario essentially attempts to displace his femininity *onto* the woman and his manipulations of her are an accurate barometer of an internal struggle to master what can never be totally disowned.

The fantasy romance

Both La Svengali and Tina Turner are expressions of a type discussed by Andrew Britton as (following a French tradition) "*la divine*". The type manifests itself culturally in various forms, from the imagery of the Romantic poets to the androgynous star performer. Of the latter, Britton lists Duse, Garbo, and Dietrich, going on to note that the type is often associated with a "creator" (D'Annunzio, Stiller and Sternberg) and is hence a "male muse". He goes on to note

"...given the characteristic sexual ambiguity of the type, one may risk the hypothesis that she induces a similar state. For if anything is remarkable about the subject/object relation in the Nightingale ode or *To a Skylark*, it is the way in

which it subserves the male poet's recovery of polymorphous sexuality: the object of inspiration is interpolated, through the apostrophic mode, as object, but the subject's relation to it (dramatised in both poems in extraordinary images of abandonment and penetration) is also passive and receptive." (*Katharine Hepburn: Star as Feminist*, Continuum Press, New York).

One could hardly ask for a more accurate interpretation of Little Billee's response to Trilby who (when he re-discovers her as La Svengali) restores "his long-lost power of loving", her powers likened by Du Maurier to the doctor who "blows through your nose into your Eustachian tube with a little India-rubber machine." (Du Maurier, op.cit., p.251)

Insofar as the male is willing to submit to a "pre-Oedipal state in which his relation to the mother was both active and passive" (Britton, p.25) his response is harmless. Insofar as he is heterosexually identified and tries to insert himself into the creative process (beyond, that is, a purely pragmatic role), his attentions are oppressive. The parallels between Billee's "Romantic" response and Svengali's darker one only help to establish the darker aspect of the former. Svengali fantasizes Trilby lying dead in a morgue. But Trilby's efforts to become a lady in Billee's eyes likewise render her corpse-like, in fact so thin "the bones of her cheeks and jaws began to show themselves".

Svengali and Ike cannot submit to even this compromised position: They are defined by an absolute refusal to submit to "penetration". For them gender difference must always be foregrounded and one is not surprised that both men perform preliminary exams of the oral cavities of their respective protégées, symbolic gynecological exams to determine if she is in fact a woman at all. Ike's libidinal response to Tina actually recalls the quotation from Freud with which I began. When Ike gives her the stage name "Tina Turner", her new initials derive doubly (as her sister notes) from his surname. In the later courtroom scene (where Tina battles to retain that name) Ike betrays the initial impetus behind this gesture when he reveals "the name's got my daddy's blood on it". For Ike, Tina's masculinity literally evokes the father for whom Ike at one time assumed "an affectionate feminine attitude".

The impresario must deny his "feminine" response to la divine's "masculinity" and the heterosexual romance provides the perfect denial. One is not surprised that a masculine fantasy of romance (in contrast to the response of the Romantic poets) is a recurring feature of these texts. Addison de Witt assumes that Eve knows that she "belongs" to him. Waldo Lydecker positions Laura and himself among the world's great lovers as evidenced by the pre-recorded radio broadcast that accompanies his death. But in *Svengali* (the admirable 1931 film of the Du Maurier novel), Svengali must finally admit (at the moment the hypnotized Trilby finally declares her love) "It is only Svengali talking to himself again".

If the heterosexual romance is a fabrication, the impresario's attempt to insert himself into the creative process is equally self-delusional, as Ike's attempts to impose himself as "creator" make clear. The "Fool in Love" sequence provides the best example. Completely demoralised by Ike's emotional battering despite her efforts on his behalf, Tina stands on stage unable or unwilling to perform. Ike quietly walks up behind her and kisses her cheek at which point she begins to sing. This "number" is probably the most emotionally charged of the film: Gibson's direction and Angela Bassett's monumental performance suggest Tina's performance of the song is both a cry of pain and a defiant assertion of her powers *in spite of* Ike's presence. For Ike, as he flaunts his phallic guitar, Tina's performances regularly provide the fantasy spectacle of Woman's prostration and sexual abandon as evidenced equally by the songs he writes or chooses for her. This masculine fantasy is undermined by the actual audience response as is evidenced by the conclusion of the "Proud Mary" sequence where Ike fades into the background as the crowd chants *Tina's* name. It is interesting that Britton examines "la divine" in relation to Katharine Hepburn, who of course has no equivalent to Sternberg or Stiller, the male coming closest to that function being a gay man (George Cukor), a telling factor in regards to the longevity of their creative relationship.

Destruction

The male's failed attempt to deny his femininity as well as his failure to impose himself upon a woman characterized as both creatively and sexually complete unto herself leads to an attempt to destroy the protégée. Addison restricts Eve's movements and enslaves her sexually. Waldo twice tries to murder

Laura. Ike resorts to physical abuse, rape, and likewise the threat of murder. And Svengali finally destroys Trilby's voice.

But destructive impulses characterise these relations from their inception. The man can never admit identification. Neither can the woman's equal or superior powers be countenanced. Svengali's relationship to an earlier pupil, Honorine, is revealing. Unlike Trilby, Honorine comes to him with a beautiful singing voice. Svengali's efforts to "unteach" her end by destroying both the voice as well as the woman and we can deduce this was his subconscious intent. Similarly, Ike's attempts to get Tina to sing louder and rougher suggest a desire to destroy the phallic voice.

The impresario/protégée relationship is a telling metaphor for male dominated heterosexual relations and one of its greatest revelations is the personal strain upon the man that results from his attempt to enforce sexual difference through the imposition of the phallus (of which Svengali's hypnotic gaze is a brilliant metaphor). Waldo Lydecker goes insane. Ike becomes addicted to drugs. Svengali destroys Trilby's voice ostensibly to prove his powers to the three Britons who have appeared just when he must assert his hypnotic gaze upon Trilby. It has been suggested earlier in the text that two of the Britons (Billee and the Hercules-like Taffy) inspire additional and contradictory libidinal responses in Svengali. Svengali's collapse (he dies shortly thereafter) is easily read as resulting from an internal psychic struggle, a struggle in fact to suppress the triumphant return of his own bisexuality.

I, Tina

And just what happens to the woman who submits to the impresario's project of domination? Offstage La Svengali is regarded as being "bête comme un pot" and Tina is reduced to a series of mirror reflections. Her "nothingness" is in fact noted by Ike's wife Lorraine/Penny Johnson at the moment the mirror motif is introduced. Anticipating that Tina will replace her and discovering Tina in an upstairs bedroom, Lorraine threatens to kill Tina. She instead declares that Tina "ain't even worth the bullet" and turns the gun upon herself, as we watch Tina's horrified reflection in a mirror.

Tina becomes not only a reflection but specifically a reflection of Ike, a point made abundantly clear in the interview where (Ike in foreground, Tina's reflection in background) the "British invasion" is discussed, Tina clearly mouthing Ike's sentiments. She remains a reflection until she of course asserts her own priorities, a moment dramatically rendered by director Gibson when Tina smashes a window as she exits Ike's car. The accumulated meaning that has attached to mirrors is beautifully conveyed at the conclusion. A little earlier, Tina (after the limousine battle with Ike, where she emerged scarred but triumphant) confronted her battered image. She at that point remained Ike's reflection, a reflection specifically of the masculine code of retaliation and physical brutality. The Tina who confronts Ike at the end refuses both the anger and the fear (in response to Ike's threat to kill her) that would confirm Ike's selfhood and in doing so, confirms her own selfhood. The presence of mirror and gun in this scene also recall Lorraine's suicide attempt: Tina's assertion of self is also a cri-

tique of Lorraine's *negative* assertion (compare also the abandonment of Lorraine's children). In a magnificent reversal of the motif, Tina exits to claim the stage as a solo performer and Ike is reduced to a reflection.

It was the stage that provided Tina her one salvation during her years with Ike. The stage's metaphorical function in *What's Love* derives from the intersection of a specific motif of the Freudian-feminist melodrama and materials of the genre the film more obviously belongs to, the "biopic"/backstage melodrama, which inevitably takes as its theme the irresolvability of compulsory heterosexuality to female stardom. The specific motif I have in mind is the marital bedroom, which (following the logic of the genre's critique of bourgeois marriage) "becomes the site of the woman's ultimate terrors and humiliation, and of the displacement of her sexuality into hysteria" (*A New Servitude*, p.40). The recurring association of the heroine's endangerment with bedrooms (where regularly occur her illness, madness or near death) derive from this metaphorical function and it is worth noting that *Marnie*, a late derivative which subverts many of the genre's motifs, retains the logic of the bedroom when Marnie is raped there. Tina's brutalization and imprisonment there follows in this tradition.

As Britton further notes, the powerful female energies repressed in "the bedroom" accumulate elsewhere, "in a space of taboo within or adjacent to 'the house' (the West Wing and boathouse in *Rebecca*, the attic in *Gaslight*, etc.) and their eventual eruption (as in the gothic's realization of "the return of the repressed") often leads to the destruction of "the house". This is where *What's Love* diverges, for Tina has an outlet denied her ancestors in the genre, the stage, where her phallic energies find release and are regularly on public display. The metaphors of stage and bedroom are literally joined with Ike's kiss in "The Fool in Love" sequence where Tina's performance defies the imposition of the phallus. However the malleability of the bedroom metaphor is also exploited by Ike when he extends the social reality for which it stands (masculine domination) and rapes Tina outside of the bedroom per se (resulting in her suicide attempt and a missed performance). As *Marnie* demonstrates, an equanimity of power in "the bedroom" falters upon the reality of the male ego. Similarly the stage cannot be shared and retain its function as conduit for the release of phallic energy: Tina's survival necessitates the dissolution of her heterosexual commitment offstage and the elimination of the superfluous male onstage.

Conclusion: Phallus and lesbian desire.

It would be undesirable (as well as impossible) to reduce the significance of the woman's film to certain issues. But clearly if the genre remains relevant it is because its materials continue to provide fertile ground for the articulation of concerns that obstinately continue to govern women's lives. If the current crop is indicative (again, avoiding oversimplification) sexuality and gender remain the primary issues ripe for articulation.

One convention of the woman's film betrays with peculiar clarity both the genre's relevance and the cultural impasse that in fact determines that relevance: the lover. I am not referring to Ike but the Roger Davies character who becomes Tina's man-

ager. Davies/James Reyne relates to what Andrew Britton has described as "the Phallus under erasure" (or ~~The~~ Phallus) which derives from Britton's "opportunistic" appropriation of Lacan's formula for Woman under patriarchy, or ~~The~~ Woman. Those familiar with the woman's film will recognize the significance of Britton's assessment of the lover as ~~The~~ Phallus. As he notes

"In himself, the lover is not of the slightest importance: he is merely a logical abstraction entailed in the undertaking to dramatise the heroine's experience of heterosexuality." (p.43)

As realized in the *mise-en-scène* and as dramatically rendered by the great female stars, Woman's experience of heterosexuality overshadows the lover who functions as catalyst (as the female star also overshadows the Paul Henrieds and George Brents who embody ~~The~~ Phallus. It should be noted that this formula does *not* pertain to the *bad* lover, the Ike Turners and other persecuting males).

Britton's brilliance was in recognizing this convention *as* a convention (as opposed to attributing it to bad casting). Davies is in this tradition, his embodiment of a "type" (blond, blue-eyed) all the more jarring for the absence of these dominant cultural standards throughout the film. He is the *good* heterosexual male who will aid Tina in the construction of a new life. The *mise en scène* also reduces his dramatic realization: In the Las Vegas scene, he is subjected to "la divine's" phallic force during Tina's performance, an effect produced by the "thrusting" camera tracks from stage to audience. The Phallus could not be more erased.

It could be argued that Davies in fact performs that pragmatic function in relation to "la divine" that I earlier drew attention to. But his interview with Tina clearly suggests the Romantic: The camera *circles* the two as with lovers in other films (compare the static cuts in the restaurant scene where Ike first propositions Tina) and Tina amends Roger's toast "to you" to "to *us*". A textual attempt to confirm gender norms and regulate female sexuality by hauling out an acceptable male is further suggested by the treatment of Jackie/Vanessa Bell Calloway the ex-Ikette who initiates Tina into Buddhism. The scene where she encourages Tina to chant is perhaps the film's loveliest and this derives from its thematic relevance (as well as the performances). As the mother led Tina into compulsory heterosexuality, a woman leads her away, and one of the first things Jackie does (during her hospital visit) is to eliminate a signifier of Ike's incursion, by addressing Tina Turner as "little Anne". Chanting is the perfect symbol for Tina's awakening to love and commitment between women, literally a language (as Tina admits) she does not know.

The film does not pursue the logic of these developments: Jackie subsequently fulfills a purely functional role in Tina's life (I should say that I do not think actual biographical data provides a significant stumbling block, the film of necessity already having altered significant facts). I assess this failure as a symptom of the cultural impasse that also gives the woman's film *as we know it* its significance. Thus even while providing a magnificent account of patriarchal oppression, *What's Love* inadvertently displays its symptoms.

by **Reni Celeste**

Lost Highway: Unveiling Cinema's Yellow Brick Road

And do you know what "the world" is to me?
Shall I show it to you in my mirror? This
world: a monster of energy, without begin-
ning, without end... enclosed by "nothingness"
as by a boundary...

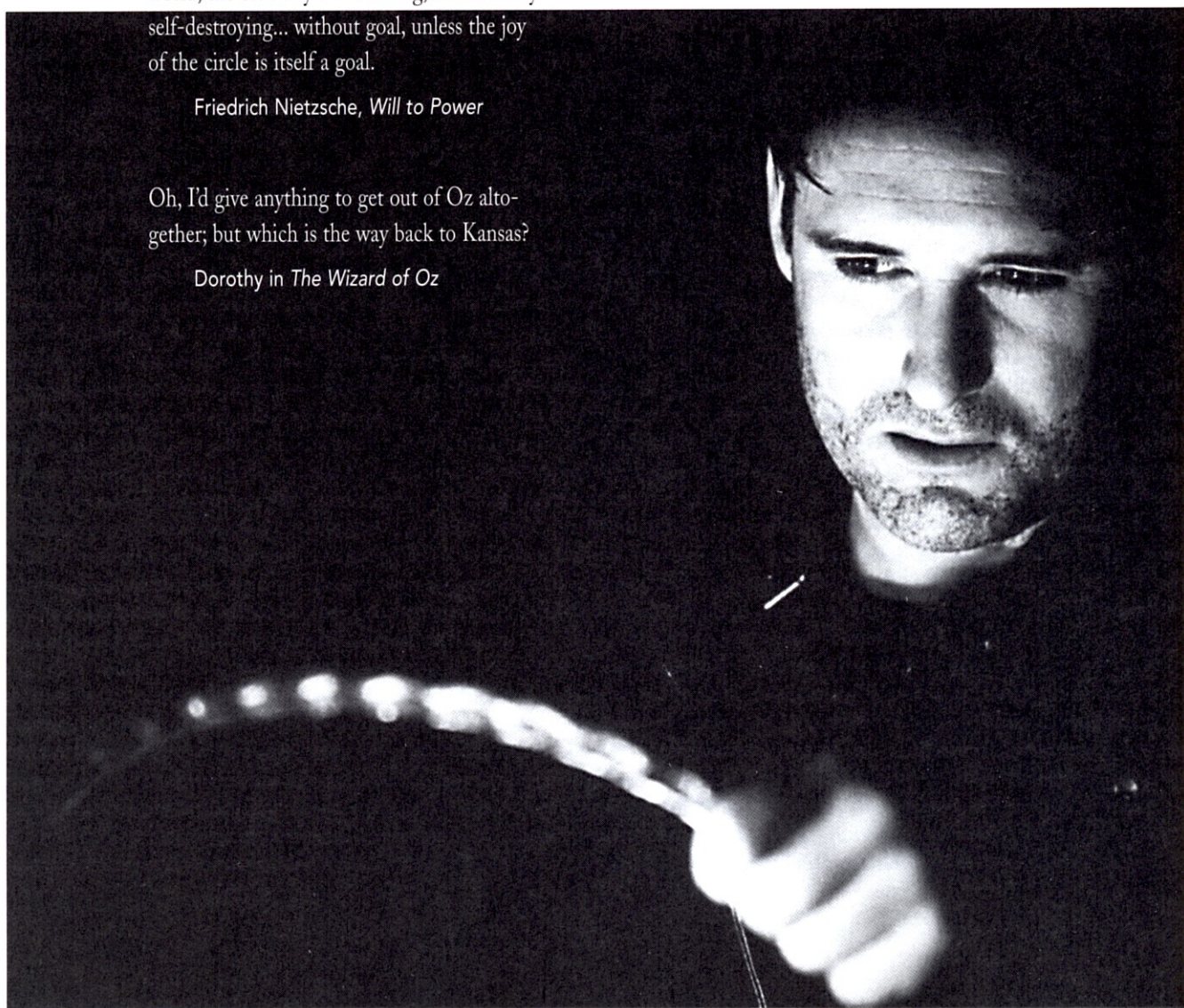
blessing itself as that which must return eter-
nally, as a becoming that knows no satiety, no
disgust, no weariness... this, my Dionysian
world, the eternally self-creating, the eternally
self-destroying... without goal, unless the joy
of the circle is itself a goal.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Will to Power*

Oh, I'd give anything to get out of Oz alto-
gether; but which is the way back to Kansas?

Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*

ENTERING THE LYNCHIAN UNIVERSE IS LIKE ENTERING A
body. It requires the delicate negotiation of a series of tunnels:
garden hose, throat, hallway, telephone cord, umbilical cord,
eustachian tube; passageways that link one of his films to the
next, that lead from one ear out the other, across film genres
and histories, across green lawns and trailer parks. One finds
here a hell as familiar as our own, a wax world whose lines and
forms are forever melting, where each object slowly transforms
into its opposite, and where all things, even the most irrecon-
cilable, are bound by a labyrinth of intricate web-like relations.



For years, critics have been treating the patient with psychoanalysis and scolding Lynch for his incorrect politics, but little attention has been given to the visual philosophy he has been projecting across the cinema screen. His work has offended equally reactionary conservative and political liberal. My intention is not to venerate Lynch for either of these two dominant positions, for that would be to rob him of one of his highest achievements; rather I would like to interpret his most recent film *Lost Highway* in relation to narrative and critical philosophy in order to bring a different lens to bear on the works of Lynch, but more broadly as an occasion to question the relation of narrative to film.

Lost Highway opens and concludes with an image of the road, or more specifically, of the yellow dotted-line, a vertical axis, flickering rapidly by in the darkness. It is in this image, which appears throughout what is otherwise "not" explicitly a road film the moment someone enters a car or takes a pertinent passage from one point to another, that the metaphorical play of the film commences. It is in this metaphor that all films become road films. The image is familiar. It has recurred throughout Lynch's films since *Blue Velvet* (1986), when the reference to America's classic road film *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and its yellow brick road first began.¹ This reference comes out of the closet in Lynch's explicit road film *Wild at Heart* (1990), where the wicked witch travels by broom alongside the escaping lovers and Lulu clicks her ruby slippers in vain in a roadside motel in Big Tuna. Somewhere in the transition from Dorothy to Lulu and from the Emerald City to Big Tuna, a hammer blow has landed, a mask cracked, a veil torn away. *Lost Highway* is the receding reflection of that laughing veil in the rear-view mirror, before its uncanny double emerges ahead in the distance. Driving is the sound of tearing cloth.

In speaking of Lynch's virtuoso use of sound, Michel Chion demands that we listen to Lynch's films, but that we listen with our eyes.² In a similar spirit I would like to suggest that we think philosophy when we watch Lynch's films, but that we think it with our eyes and ears. One of the best legacies of the critiques of metaphysics has been the insistence on thinking Being not in the form of an Aristotelian logic of stable identity, a conception which suited the interests of systematic and scientific thinking, but rather as inseparable from temporality and spatiality, a conception more suitable to the interests of addressing experience and creative forms. Lynch's films show not only that the ontological and epistemological appear, but that they must appear in particular styles. Just as painting, film, and literature have been understood within national contexts, there has always been a very particular American metaphysics, with its very particular American dualisms. There was always something paradoxical about corn-fed Dorothy, with the bows straddling her curly brown pig-tails and those glittery ruby pumps loaded with enough power to send her hurtling down the yellow highway. It is at this nexus, this position where violence meets tenderness, waking meets dream, blond meets brunette, lipstick meets blood, where something very sweet and innocuous becomes something very sick and degrading, at the very border where oppo-

sites becomes both discrete and indistinguishable, that Lynch enters with his particular reading and rewriting of this American metaphysics. Obscenity is one of the key ingredients in turning over the soil.

The American landscape was always well-mapped for metaphysical and theological metaphor. A nation founded on a journey West, an escape through the desert of adversity toward the promised land of a mythic California. The wagons that bulldozed across native soil, stopping only to wipe the blood and flesh off their wheels, marked the highway, and dusty earth became asphalt not long before Bob Hope, Bing Crosby and Dorothy Lamour hit the road and broke into song.³ The road has always been the chief vehicle of this metaphor of progress, origin and destination. It is only fitting that it should also become the chief vehicle for its unraveling. The many metaphors that meet at these intersections on the road include narrative, desire, interpretation, and the film reels themselves. *Lost Highway* takes the road film one toll further around the loop to reveal the mad dislocation that was already implicit in that American journey.

The *Lost Highway* narrative is cyclical as opposed to circular or linear. It takes just over two hours to arrive back at the place where it began, but its second beginning arrives not as final destination or return to center, but as another gesture of transit. Its ideal presentation would be an endless loop in a theater in which spectators could enter at any moment during the cycle and leave at any point,⁴ keenly conscious both that the film will begin again and again and that we can never step twice into the same river. As such, both beginning and ending become arbitrary markers on a narrative road not unlike history, seasonal change, and the body itself. And film and narrative become something beastly and inorganically alive.

By foregrounding narrative, *Lost Highway* also foregrounds the accompanying philosophical problems implicit in the movement of thought and signification: reflexivity and duality, mirroring and doubling. In correspondence with my emphasis on narrative, I will first broadly lay out the three dominant parts of the narrative. Each of these parts and their



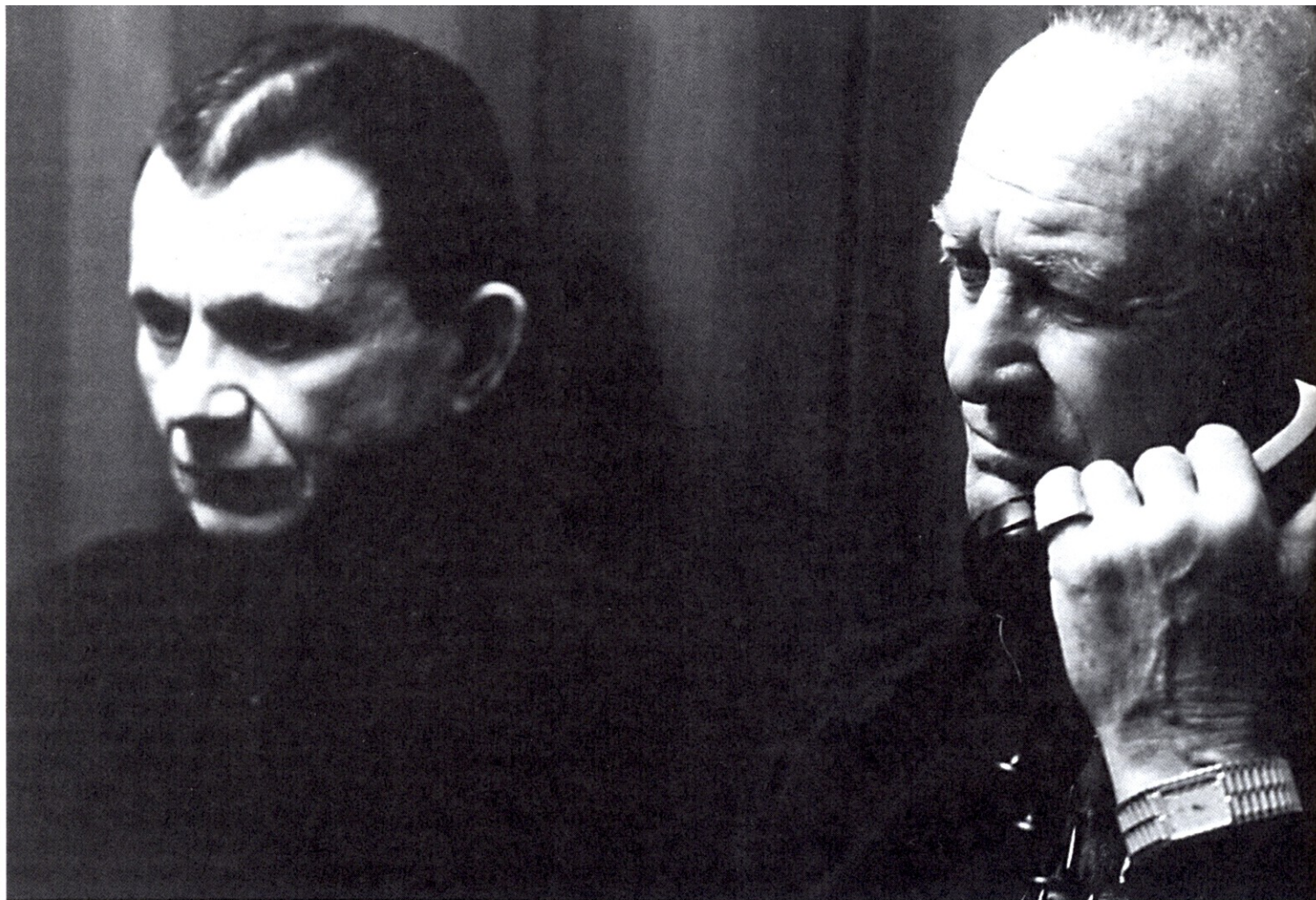
David Lynch

1. These references in *Blue Velvet* are drawn out by C. Kenneth Pellow in his article "Down the Yellow Brick Road: Two Dorothys and the Journey of Initiation in Dream and Nightmare," *Film Quarterly* 18, n. 3: pp. 160-177.

2. Michael Chion, *David Lynch* (British Film Institute: 1995) p. 170.

3. These three starred together in seven merry musical road films in the 1940s, with such names as *Road to Rio* and *Road to Utopia*.

4. Up until the 1960s it was common practice to enter and leave theatres at various points in the narrative.



relations serves to complicate the traditional notion of time as a forward progression consisting of three dimensions—past, present, and future, as well as the traditional notion of narrative as a self-enclosed structure consisting of plot, drama, and closure. The present needs the future to determine its own past, which is oddly also its future.

The First Toll

The first world encountered in this film is enveloped in the mood of suspicion, silence, clues that have no meaning and acts that have no agent. A sax player named Fred/Bill Pullman hears a strange message on his home intercom informing him that Dick Laurent is dead. But who is Dick Laurent? He looks out the window but there is no one. He and his wife Renee/Patricia Arquette occupy their Los Angeles home like mutual suspects, double agents in a film noir script. He feels that he is not quite himself and that his wife is unfamiliar. Their silence locates the infinity between each unique, isolated individual. Each word that passes between them roars out into a void like a lighthouse beacon.

On three successive days they find an anonymous unmarked envelope containing a video on their front steps. The first day they watch the video together and it seems that a terrible secret involving one of them is about to be revealed to the other. But the first video is not yet narrative. It is merely a single shot of the exterior of their home. On the second

day, they watch with horror as narrative develops. The camera repeats the first image and follows with a second shot that has entered their interior, traveling up their staircase and into their bedroom where it looks down from an unlikely angle at the two of them sleeping. After informing the police, they attend a party where Fred is approached by a sinister and ghastly man in black who claims to be both at the party and inside Fred's house simultaneously. When Fred resists the impossible, the Nameless Man pulls out a cellular phone and insists that he call to verify. When the Nameless Man answers on the other end followed by an echoing double laugh, Fred flees for home with Renee. This dialogue between Fred and the Nameless Man is one of several scenes throughout the film in which all exterior action and sound is suspended, placing the foreground into an ominous, displaced space of time.

On the third day, the anonymous package has lost its sinister edge and become simply routine. Fred casually flicks the tape into the VCR before his wife can respond to his "aren't you going to watch the tape, honey?" To his horrified surprise the final image discloses a scene of himself over the bloody dismembered body of his wife. "Noooo" he screams, but yes, he's tried, condemned to death, and locked in a cell. His casual gesture becomes a causal one.

In his cell Fred suffers from excruciating head pain coupled with black-and-white memories of the murder scene that sim-

ply correspond to the video sequence. Documentary "truth" becomes memory as doubt and forgetting. One night he reaches unbearable levels of pain and sees frantic images of the yellow dotted lines of the highway, a stranger approaching the road, and a windowless house in the desert that explodes into a fiery mass and then miraculously implodes back into its original form. This is the scene of the first exchange.

Second Toll

The following morning it is not Fred who sits in the cell. He has been replaced by a gentle young man named Pete/Balthazar Getty, who shows marks of a forgotten violence on his face and is uncertain how he got there or why. Pete is released to his parents, his mechanics job, and his girlfriend, but he is not quite himself. At the auto shop, Pete's most devoted patron, Mr. Eddy/Robert Loggia, leader of an underground sex ring, pays him a visit one day in his black Cadillac convertible accompanied by a blond bombshell named Alice who bears an uncanny resemblance to the dark-haired Renee. Pete's first vision of Alice, emerging like a myth from the black Cadillac, is one of Lynch's privileged moments, a break into dream-time, music-time, enacting a moment of falling, into love, into an insatiable pursuit, a bottomless darkness, and into the web of the *femme fatale*. Their clandestine affair will slowly develop across a series of nights of hotel sex under the eyes of two laws: the police investigators and the sinister threat of Mr. Eddy and his friend the Nameless Man. As in *Wild at Heart* repeated episodes of gratifying sex merely highlight the perpetual gnaw, the itch that can never be scratched away.

As the threat encroaches the lovers are driven into flight. Alice concocts a plot whereby they will rob her pimp and flee with the cash. At the appointed time, Pete enters the pimp's home and is accosted by an enormous obscene screen image of the naked Alice being fucked to the sound of German industrial music. His head hurts, he is ill, transformation is in the air. They accidentally murder the pimp and hit the road, but not before he glimpses a photo of Alice and Renee, blond and brunette, side by side in the same frame with the ring boys. Something is amiss, a mystery beckons to be resolved. Alice leads him to the house of a fence who will buy their goods, and oddly it is the same desolate house in the desert from Fred's mind. No one is home. They make love and when he cries out to her in anguish that he wants her, she says in a roaring whisper "you will never have me," then walks toward the house and enters, becoming the receding destination of desire incarnate. The house is once again the site of exchange.

The First Toll Again

Pete transforms into Fred and rises to follow Alice to the house, but she has been displaced by the Nameless Man. Fred is chased to his car by the Nameless Man who films his flight with a video camera. Fred stops eventually at a dusty motel named the *Lost Highway*. In the adjoining room his wife Renee is fucking Mr. Eddy. She leaves and he enters and bludgeons Mr. Eddy and stuffs him in his trunk. Somewhere on the road he stops and with the aid of the Nameless Man, now configured as ally and double, he kills the man he now realizes

to be the enigmatic Dick Laurent. He then rushes home to deliver into his intercom the original phantom message to himself that "Dick Laurent is Dead." The police are now waiting outside and a car chase commences. We leave Fred hurtling down the lost highway toward yet another point of exchange.

The Nameless

Three primary fissures are foregrounded in this film: that which exists between one discrete individual and another; that which exists between the individual and itself; and that which exists between the thing and its representation. Complicating these distinctions will be the work of the film. But this work can only be done by approaching the abyss that lies between them, and finding with horror the one behind the face of the other. When Fred has a nightmare on the first night and Renee reaches over to comfort him, he awakens and, for a moment sees her face in the darkness displaced by the face of the Nameless Man he will only later meet at the party. This Nameless Man will play a leading role in the film as that which stands between doubles, between passages from one realm to the next, and between each individual and itself. He exceeds the constraints of temporality and spatiality, moving from past to present, from subject to subject, and occupying two spaces simultaneously. While everyone in this film is trapped, everyone also partakes of this blackness that exceeds limit and border.

It is perhaps tempting to interpret him as the unconscious, especially in the light of Fred's apparent forgetfulness of his wife's murder.⁵ One might also be inclined to understand him as the figure of death as symbol, like the ghoul who comes to call in Bergman's *Seventh Seal*. But I will do neither. I also want to insist that I am not understanding this figure in terms of a Hegelian negativity that serves as a resource in the dialectical process. Rather, I want to understand him in the Bataillian sense as that excess which undoes and exceeds any system of signification—a dark tear that is revealed through heterogenous matter, excess, obscenity, sacrifice, and eroticism.⁶ This is also close to Derrida's concept of Otherness, which he insists is not a lack or void but a "negativity without negativity."⁷ This is not the reverse side of positivity, but rather something that transgresses signification. To even name this figure is problematic because he is precisely what is nameless. He both is and is not. He is the downfall of Aristotelian logic and Hegelian dialectics. He is what breaks apart all construction and yet serves as its groundless ground. He is beautiful and terrifying. He is in everything and yet he is nowhere and nothing. He is glimpsed at the threshold of the paradox, the *aporia*. And he is everyone's double. I will call him the Nameless for the sake of legibility, keeping in mind that to say him is to unsay him.

"There's no place like home"

5. A good Lacanian reading could be applied to both this film and this figure, but this is not my intention.

6. cf. Georges Bataille, *Eroticism* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1986).

7. Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror* (Harvard University Press, 1986) p. 103, quoting Derrida from *Truth and Painting*.

The first thing the Nameless Man will complicate is the notion of home. Home is the structure, the center, the vessel of identity, it is both the point of origin and the destination of the road, and as such, most traditional narratives involve flight and return, fragmentation and reconciliation. But I would like to hold firm to the dual meaning invested in the complicated incantation uttered by Dorothy, rather than to simply posit a vulgar postmodernism that declares the absence of center, embracing its "opposite." The phrase "there's no place like home" means both that home is Not and that home is primary. The "there is" followed by the "no" under the shadow of the metaphoric "like" demarcates the labyrinth we are entering in language. To de-center is always to declare and function within a notion of centrality.

Fred and Renee, for example, occupy their interior like patients in a waiting room. There is no connection between their bodies and their sterile abode. They are not safe in their dwelling, there is an unnameable presence, the walls have eyes, and they walk about as if their every gesture and word were being recorded. Likewise, as the narrative develops, characters transform into other characters, neither one able to proclaim original authenticity, neither one ever fully at home. At the crossroads between these transformations is the recurring image of the road and the windowless house in the desert that perpetually explodes, undoes and reconstructs itself. As such, this image mimics flight and return, only home in Lynch time is not closure but recurrence, the precise moment of reconstitution, a place heavy with the anticipation of the coming explosion. The explosion is a dominant theme throughout the works of Lynch. It has erupted in fire, fighting, music, dance and sex. There is in every Lynch film a moment of unbridled, excessive anger and destruction that ruptures any sense of reason and context and leaves everyone uneasy, from the audience to the critics to the witnesses within the frame. In *Lost Highway* one such moment occurs when Mr. Eddy drives a tailgater off the road, threatens to blow his brains out, and beats him into a delirium. This exceeding of bounds duplicates both the bed and the breakdown of meaning, or better yet, meaning as breakdown. It is what makes narrative as poetics impossible. It is what inspires Nietzsche to shout in *Ecce Homo*, "I am no man. I am dynamite."⁸ Interpretation wields the blow. The house is on fire. The ideal space for these homeless characters will be the roadside motel.

It is interesting from this perspective to look at a classic American road film such as *The Wizard of Oz*, which while not being linear, is circular rather than cyclical. It transpires in an



America centered in its heartland, an America where one goes out into the void of dreams only to return to the center. While this circle suffers duality and is fraught with doubles, it resists repetition. Home is not displaced but rather doubly confirmed as both origin and *telos*. Home is understood as a place outside myth, a "real" place. In 1939 this "reality" was signified by the familiarity of the black-and-white image, and the land of fantasy was signified by the seemingly unnatural spectacle of the new Technicolor. From a different technological vantage point, Lynch will use black-and-white in his early films to create an unreal atmosphere in order to expose the mythos of "reality," but, beginning with *Blue Velvet*, a new use of color emerges, similar to *The Wizard of Oz* in that it also serves to complicate our sense of the real. Lynch will use color to paint an America that is as surreal as the Emerald City itself, but without the return to the reassuring black-and-white softness of Auntie Em. Black-and-white now appears in the video footage which implicates Fred in the murder of his wife. The documentary "real" is now shrouded in doubt, uncertainty, and even impossibility.

In *The Wizard of Oz* the gendered limitations that mark the nice Midwestern girl who forfeits the mystical ruby slippers when she realizes her place really is in the home, mimic the limits of the Western metaphysical narrative ruled under the sign of logos, reason, and a Judeo-Christian God. While on one level *The Wizard of Oz* critiques this metaphysics by allowing its protagonist to arrive at the coveted end point, here known as "over the rainbow," only to discover its *mythos* and to work her way back to earth, on the other hand it simply displaces the sacred transcendent with the secular metaphysics of home and heartland.⁹ Oddly enough, this journey to secular America can only be traveled with the aid of witches, magic wands, and mystical ruby shoes. Lynch will also make use of

these mythological forms to conclude *Wild at Heart*. The good witch points the way to closure, and the mythic Elvis serenade signals that it's time for the heart frame to fade to black, extinguishing all memory of the hell of narrative. But an element of irony has entered the image. We begin to get the feeling we are being mocked, just as we did in the "closure" of *Blue Velvet*, when we traveled out the ear and awakened back into the wax-like diorama of the suburban home.

The traditional road film that *The Wizard of Oz* can be understood to critique is the one invested in the gesture of escape, the flight from home, the striving toward a better place which appears as a linear trajectory usually westward toward California as *mythos*. These narratives are so plentiful in American cinema as to constitute a genre in themselves. Though American road films seem invested in a linear metaphysics of progress and *telos*, they are actually less dedicated to these notions than *The Wizard of Oz*. They are rather the foreshadow of the turn taken onto the *Lost Highway*. The classic American road narrative actually leads not to California but to a shattering moment of consciousness somewhere across the barren desert of adversity and solitude where a terrible truth emerges: that this is the road to nowhere. What lies ahead is only more of the same, what lies behind is a receding history that cannot be regained, and destination is impossible. This double bind leaves only one exit to glory: temporal death, whereby one enters the American metaphysical kingdom like James Dean, by dying and becoming an absence that is present as an afterimage in the dreams of the surviving: to be an American myth. To pass this exit is to meet either failure or farce.

The Mirror Dentata

In the lonely bedroom of *Lost Highway*, the mirror has teeth, and whoever stands too close will be devoured... their hell will not be death, but yet another life, a parallel life, on the other side of the looking glass. The mirror has been a source of mystical transversion and a point of passage in narratives for so long as to have become cliché. It has signaled the divided self, the marker between dream and waking, fantasy and reality. In the mirror we are inaugurated into a labyrinth of terror and infinite ontological reflexivity we can scarcely fathom, and as such the notion of the reflected image and the double has played a dominant role in the genres of horror and fantasy in both literary and film narrative. While terror, which has always spoken of the borders of reason, has had a very low profile in the philosophy canon, and reflexivity and duality have for the most part been theorized in absence from visceral experience, the threat invoked by the reflexive act is explicit in the determination of Western philosophy to suture the abyss of the mirror.

The notion of reflection, a founding principle of philosophy, becomes a central, systematic notion in modern philosophy with the writings of Descartes. Rodolphe Gasché defines this philosophical conception of reflection as the moment of separation where the mind turns itself outward toward an object, but also more explicitly as the moment where this activity itself becomes the object of reflection. This brings the

subject into the foreground in modern philosophy as a center and origin of meaning. As Gasché writes,

With such a bending back upon the modalities of object perception, reflection shows itself to mean primarily self-reflection, self-relation, self-mirroring... self-reflection marks the human being's rise to the rank of a subject. It makes the human being a subjectivity that has a center in itself, a self-consciousness certain of itself.¹⁰

Gasché also points out that the term reflection or *reflectere* means literally "to bend" or "to turn back or backward," as well as "to bring back", and that the many conceptions of reflection share the optic metaphor of throwing back light in the form of images. So the mind's grasp of itself grasping itself "becomes analogous to the process whereby physical light is thrown back on a reflecting surface."¹¹

Lost Highway enacts the fissure between knowledge and reflexivity. This fissure is in the doubles and parallel worlds, as well as in cinema and spectatorship itself. It is in the Nameless who wields a camcorder, making autonomous images that perpetually separate and suspend in doubt. But the image of reflexivity and doubling that emerges in this film departs significantly from the classic double of modern literature and the Cartesian subjectivity of modern philosophy. Lynch's doubles are neither discrete nor antagonistic warring forces of contradiction. The treatment in Lynch's film of the American binaries pushes the limits between brunette and blond, innocence and criminality, blue and red, sex and death, surface and subterranean, to the point where they implicate one another. They are not unified, synthesized, neutralized nor overcome in this commingling. Rather they illustrate the perpetually divided "origin" of reflexivity. Derrida describes the problem well in *On Grammatology*,

There are things like reflecting pools, and images, an infinite reference from one to the other, but no longer a source, a spring. There is no longer a simple origin. For what is reflected is split in itself and not only as an addition to itself of its image. The reflection, the image, the double, splits what it doubles. The origin of the speculation becomes a difference. What can look at itself is not one; and the law of the addition of the origin to its representation, of the thing to its image, is that one plus one makes at least three.¹²

Similarly Nietzsche in *Ecce Homo* will joyously declare himself a doppelganger: "I have a second face in addition to the first. And perhaps also a third."¹³ In this depiction of meaning the very act of reflection creates not simply a double, but doubles

8. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 326

9. Paul Nathanson in *Over the Rainbow: The Wizard of Oz as a Secular Myth in America*, argues similarly that Dorothy's journey recapitulates paradigmatic stories of both American and Christianity.

10. Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror*, p. 14

11. *ibid.*, p.16.

12. Jacques Derrida, *On Grammatology*, p. 36

13. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 225.

back, splitting the "source." The third face is just the beginning.

Implicit in the notion of reflexivity, doubles, and representation is the notion of passage and link. The double is that which is both divided and joined. The link, the passageway, becomes the place where one is both and neither. The road is such a link, functioning as both ground and link. The image of the severed link reoccurs throughout the films of Lynch; it is in the log carried by the Log Lady in *Twin Peaks* (1989), the umbilical cords which surround the dancing feet of the Radiator Lady in *Eraserhead* (1976), and in *Lost Highway* it is in the broken, dotted line that makes up that larger link between two points, which is the road.¹⁴

Grand Cycles of the West

It is perhaps fitting that postmodern epistemologies that adopt cyclical versus linear notions of time can also be seen as part of a critique which in itself follows a cyclical course. The writings of Nietzsche and Heidegger¹⁵ both pose a challenge to the grand linear narrative of Western culture and do so by turning back (*reflectere*) to the presocratic Greek thinkers to uncover a conception of being and time prior to the emergence of Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysics. Heidegger questions a subject-centered tradition that has forgotten Being by replacing it with the beings of being. He strives to reassert Being as Time, rather than as subject or thing that merely moves through time. Nietzsche, on the other hand, critiques those reactive forces which work to deny and steady the flowing Dionysian world of Becoming.¹⁶ Broadly speaking, the critique of metaphysics understood within the context of narrative takes place within a Western culture constituted as the entwined parallel journey of two dominant linear narratives — the biblical text and metaphysics. On one hand, the Judeo-Christian biblical narrative precedes and writes history as the Word of God. It is a linear narrative beginning with Genesis and culminating in the Last Judgement. As such, the temporal world is a broken world, condemned to sin and desire, finding redemption only in a turn away from flesh to the spirit. This visual narrative dominates the history of painting and images up to modernity. Philosophy as metaphysics breaks from the Greek pre-archaic sense of cyclical time and enacts a secular version of the same impulse to work within a linear path moving from origin to *telos*, where the transcendent unified principle serves as cause, origin and foundation of the world of multiplicity.¹⁷ Heidegger calls this metaphysics an onto-theology. What begins in the writings of Plato and Aristotle reaches its climax in the dialectical journey of the Hegelian Absolute Spirit which, though circular, culminates in a closed system. And yet the return to presocratic conceptions of being and time can never be a return to origin; it is a new place one arrives at, one in which words like "Socrates" and "metaphysics" bear a meaning that they didn't have on the last turn. Similarly, at the conclusion of *Lost Highway*, when Fred returns to his home, to deliver the message that will set the whole narrative in motion again, a new element has entered the script that was not there the first time around in the form of the cop cars waiting outside the home. This illustrates well that repetition is never identical, and that at the core of sameness is difference.

While Nietzsche and Heidegger did not use the term "narrative," their emphasis on reestablishing temporality into ontology and epistemology also entails certain upsets to the traditional notion of narrative as a stable structure, as a vessel which contains time. Despite the emergence in this century of several critiques of metaphysics, two major modern, formalist notions of narrative became dominant in the study of the creative text: one, the creative text emergence of narrative as a central category in structuralist poetics as narratology, and two, the anti-narrative political discourse that emerged in film studies in the 1970s around the critique of classic Hollywood narrative cinema. While this paradigm has not gone without challenge in film theory,¹⁸ it still remains dominant. It will be useful here to consider it briefly.

While several divergent positions on narrative emerge in the 1970s concerning film, including important contributions from Laura Mulvey, Colin MacCabe, Peter Wollen and Peter Gidal, they share a common political and formalist Althusserian *telos* and an attempt to situate alternative cinemas within the avant-garde. Stephen Heath's essay "Narrative Space"¹⁹ was representative of the *Screen* position and is interesting for the manner in which it calls into question not only narrative but the development of codes of vision and figuration inherited from Quattrocento perspective, the visual techniques developed in the fifteenth century Italian painting for creating the illusion of three-dimensional reality. Heath argues that the camera has followed this tradition in positing a view from a central perspective and that spectatorship has been trained to understand representation in these terms. Film narrative in this scenario, he argues, developed as a response to the constant threat introduced within the frame by movement. Whereas in classical painting the composition is organized along dominant lines of force, in cinema this centering must be achieved by the action within the frame; that is, by the logic of the narrative. Heath argues that the movement of classical cinema is always made in the interest of forming coherence in the face of disruption, in order to center a subject under siege. For instance he uses the psychoanalytic concept of "suture" to describe the ongoing dialogue between lack and fulfillment that transpires both within shots and from shot to shot. This dialogue is foremost for Heath an ideological one, constituting a subject in the form of dominant ideologies.

While these critiques mirror the larger critique of metaphysics in their emphasis on disrupting a movement toward stability and wholeness and closure, they differ in an important respect. By working within the framework of ideology, these theories place an impossible burden on alternative cinema as form. The avant-garde film is given the task of speaking for truth, while classic narrative is delegated to myth, ideology, and abuse. As such, these theories simply take a longer and seemingly more critical road back to the same metaphysics of identity based on a conception of truth as correctness or correspondence. Rather I am understanding narrative not simply as structural form or story or ideology, but as an unfolding, an unconcealing, in the Heideggerean sense of truth as unconcealment,

...this is never a merely existent state, but a happening. Unconcealedness (truth) is neither an attribute of factual things...nor one of its propositions... That which is, is familiar, reliable, ordinary. Nevertheless, the clearing is pervaded by a constant concealment in the double form of refusal and dissembling. At bottom the ordinary is not ordinary; it is extra-ordinary, uncanny. The nature of truth, that is, of Unconcealedness, is dominated throughout by a denial. *This denial, in the form of a double concealment, belongs to the nature of truth as unconcealedness.* Truth in its nature is untruth... [this] is not, however, intended to state that truth is at bottom falsehood. Nor does it mean that truth is never itself but, viewed dialectically, is always also its opposite... What is truth, that it can happen as, or even must happen as, art?²⁰

This epistemology, developed in hermeneutics and Deconstruction, foregrounds interpretation and turns narrative into a process of disclosure. As such is it neither good nor evil, but both. This epistemology also significantly upsets the solidified base from which political and ideological positions have traditionally been voiced. To involve the presence of time in the epistemological and the ontological necessarily destabilizes the fixed ground of the ethical as well. The real challenge of contemporary political and moral thought is to theorize on post-metaphysical ethics, a non-static conception of justice. Critiques which read texts in order to delineate the politically "progressive" from the "regressive" remain ensconced in the stability of metaphysics, fixed in a modern conception of justice.²¹ Lynch's cinema has never fallen under the good graces of such readings. His vision of America has been neither condemning or embracing, and his pastiche never simply playful nor nihilistic. Ultimately, Lynch's primary interest has been in dissecting the cat, following along its strange corridors, peering into its pink folds and red tunnels.²² If we come closer, the inner organs begin to emerge. Lynch is interested in coming closer. Exaggeration, the seeing "too much" of obscenity, has always been an important part of Lynch's language. Even a fluorescent diner sign can be obscene if we look at it long enough, and especially if we listen to it. Such visions unconceal something beneath form, something naked in its neutrality, the horrible thing that Emmanuel Levinas called the "there is" and described as

"...something resembling what one hears when one puts an empty shell close to the ear, as if the emptiness were full, as if the silence were a noise. It is something one can also feel when one thinks that even if there were nothing, the fact that "there is" is undeniable. Not that there is this or that; but the very scene of being is open: there is."²³

The pilot for *Twin Peaks* ends with a terrifying image of a hand, a part of some unknown whole, reaching toward the dark soil and turning over a rock beneath which a precious clue lies hidden. We never see the broken gold heart that waits there in the dark, just the sudden gesture of the hand turning the stone followed by an image of the terror-ridden mother of the late Laura Palmer waking with a jolt from her disturbing vision. It is this shock of waking, placed at the very end of the

pilot, that signals the beginning of a 29 episode dream of American life. The unwinding of narrative, becoming, and interpretation are given *appearance* here. They are a reaching hand, a rock being overturned, a scream in the night bed. Paradoxically, word, image, and sound unite in cinema in order to reveal the fragmentation of meaning, and more precisely the point where meaning explodes and implodes in upon itself perpetually.

In its cyclical portrayal of meaning, *Lost Highway*'s narrative "unconceals" what narrative strives to conceal about itself. The cycle is not simply a set track, on which a determined course of events will forever circle like a broken record. This is apparent in the film's conclusion when new elements emerge, such as developing police knowledge, that were not in the cycle's past, now configured as its future. Similarly, certain nagging and unresolvable problems emerge within the narrative, strains that cannot be bound and that escape interpretation. For instance, the spatiality of the temporality is unresolvable, as is the question of continuity of consciousness in peripheral characters. It is not clear whether these parallel realities are happening simultaneously or what space the receding double occupies. *Lost Highway* is a film that resists closure hermeneutically as well as structurally because, like organic forms, it forever defies the laws of a logic that could stabilize it, and yet must appear in form, as a structure. Likewise narrative circulates simultaneously as limit or law and as its undoing. I am not arguing that *Lost Highway*, by virtue of its untraditional form, breaks free from dominant ideology... rather I am arguing that *Lost Highway* is a work that discloses the radical alterity and apoeitic complexity of narrative and meaning. Cinema is being described here not only as something moving, but as something alive. Spectatorship and interpretation are the link, a collision on the intersection of two lost highways.

14. Michael Chion in *David Lynch* (pp. 183-4) speaks of multiple images of links in terms of fragment vs. whole and in terms of the copula in Lacanian terms. He points out links both within the films and in the image and sound structure as well, from continuity shots to sound copulas.

15. I am understanding Nietzsche and Heidegger as the forerunners of postmodernism because Nietzsche's main lines of thought have been developed in the works of Foucault, Bataille, and Deleuze; and the two major readings of Heidegger have developed into hermeneutics (Gadamer) and deconstruction (Derrida). Lacan's psychoanalysis is also strongly influenced by his reading of Heidegger.

16. These arguments are most fully expressed in Heidegger's *Being and Time* and in Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy, Beyond Good and Evil, Genealogy of Morals*.

17. I am of course speaking very broadly here, very aware that both Christianity and metaphysics are much more complicated.

18. cf. *Classical Hollywood Narrative; The Paradigm Wars*, ed. Jane Gaines (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992).

19. Heath, Stephen, "Narrative Space", *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986). Originally published in *Screen* (Autumn 1976, 17:19-75).

20. Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Art*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) pp. 55-57. Also see *Being and Time*, section 44.

21. For non-static readings of justice see Derrida's essay "Force of Law" or Levinas' *Totality and Infinity or Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*.

22. Michael Chion speaks of Lynch's childhood fascination with dissecting and then rebuilding animals.

23. Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1895) p. 45. Also discussed in length in *Existence and Existents*.

A TRIBUTE TO TAIWAN: FOUR MASTERPIECES

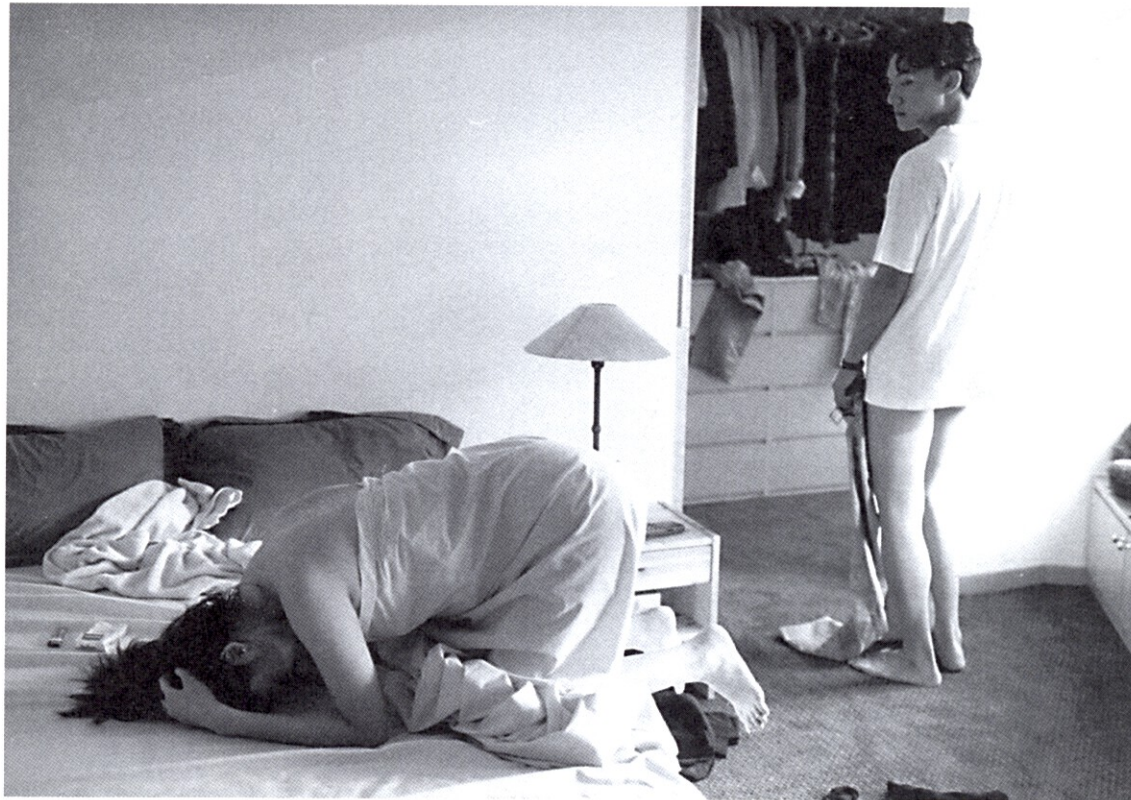
Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *City of Sadness*



Tsai Ming-Liang's *Vive L'Amour*

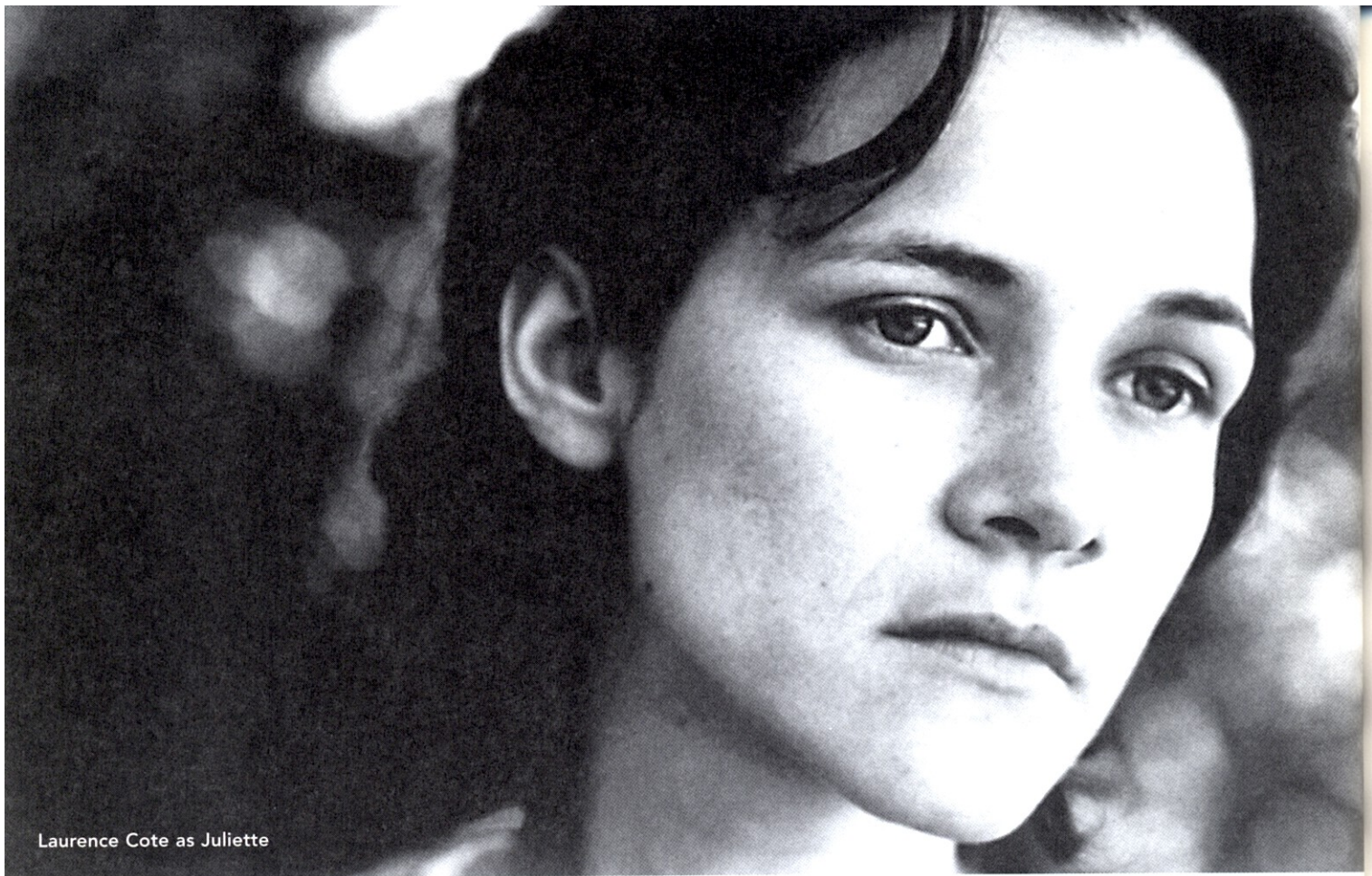


Edward Yang's *Mahjong*



Ang Lee's *Eat Drink Man Woman*





Laurence Cote as Juliette

by **Diane Sippi**

The Virtues of Theft: André Téchiné's *Thieves*

"The truth behind this, which we are all so quick to disavow, is that man is not a gentle creature who retaliates only when attacked. Part of his instinctive nature is a large dose of aggressiveness. His neighbor is not only a potential helper or sexual object but an object of temptation. Man is tempted to satisfy his need for aggression at his neighbor's expense—to exploit him at work, take advantage of him sexually, plunder and manipulate him, torture and kill him. It is precisely because your neighbor is not worthy of love and is, in fact your enemy, that you must love him as yourself."

Marie LeBlanc/Catherine Deneuve
in *Thieves*

Analysis shows that a relation (always social) determines its terms, and not the reverse, and that each individual is a locus in which an incoherent (and often contradictory) plurality of such relational determinations interact. Moreover, the question at hand concerns modes of operation or schemata of action... an operational logic whose models go as far back as the age-old ruses of fishes and insects that disguise or transform themselves in order to survive.... The purpose... is.. to bring to light the models of action characteristic of users whose status as the dominated element in a society (a status that does not mean that they are either passive or docile) is concealed by the euphemistic term "consumers." Everyday life invents itself by poaching in countless ways on the property of others.

Michel de Certeau,
The Practice of Everyday Life (xi-xii)

ACROSS GENRES AND REPUTATIONS, OLD AND NEW, THIS year's French cinema has feasted on thieves of many varieties. Claude Chabrol's rebellious pair in *La Cérémonie* are the most obvious, stealing clothes or the mail for spite, but stealing rifles for firearms, in their protest against subjugation and hypocrisy. Claire Denis' lonely adolescent in her ingeniously impressionistic *Nénette et Boni* kidnaps a baby that not only brings to life the stolen affection of his fantasies but serves as a sign of faith in his sister and their mutual love. In Gilles Mimouni's *L'Appartement*, an homage to Hitchcock and Hollywood classics, a young woman appropriates her friend's persona—her image, name, and habitat—to steal a relationship with the man pursuing her. Claude Lelouch's romantically stylish *Men, Women: User's Manual* presents a female doctor who steals and redirects confidential medical information between two patients to retaliate against fearless male connivance that resurfaces heroically. And in Ismael Ferroukhi's *L'Inconnu*, Catherine Deneuve simply steals a chance moment with “the unknown” that is pure poetry. The results of all these thefts, real and symbolic, are imaginative and heartwarming. I would like to add to this mere fragment of a list André Téchiné's *Thieves* (*Les Voleurs*), which shows us how the cinema can serve as a formal model, a parallel process, for our emotional development in life.

In the mid-1990s Téchiné is one who appears to be making films more because he has much to say than because he has particularly cinematic ways of saying it. His screenplays, dense with verbiage, are demanding vehicles for some of the best French actors today because his characters emerge as increasingly complex with their own inherent contradictions. They are familiar and surprising at once, often baffling but compelling as they steer us into the morality mazes of our everyday behaviors. Their depth is all the more reason that we are content to view *Thieves* (1995) as an astute investigation of the sociopathologies taken up in the best of gangster and detective films, mysteries and *films noirs*.

Yet trying to dismantle *Thieves* is like pulling angel hair from the needles of an evergreen tree: successive attempts at separate branches reveal the task to be prickly at best and seemingly futile, given the inseparability of the fibers from the form they cling to and from each other as well. Hardly a person or situation in the film is autonomous or insignificant, just as in our everyday world we are constantly playing out, in our various relations, conflicts derived from earlier and adjacent ones. “In life we never renounce, we replace,” one character confides in another near the end of the story. These words are not only the theme and the plot of the film, but also the concept that organizes *Thieves*' cinematic structure—a careful mounting of supple strands of interdependent recollections as razorsharp in their overview and retrieval as they are in and of themselves. Writer-director André Téchiné has a deft touch, and this particular film, like others in his oeuvre, is as delicately unspooled as it was poignantly wound.

If we read the film within the regimes of either morality or power, we miss it at the core: *Thieves* is about neither saints and sinners nor losers and winners but compensation for emotional losses and for thefts that transpired long ago in the

recesses of myths about the family, property, and the state. The film begins and ends with a child who can't sleep. Life for him is a bad dream; if it's a world with love, it's a world he feels he'll never have. Throughout this same period a mature woman finds in a younger woman what she always looked for in a man, but her discovery makes a casualty of her. She extends her legacy to a male acquaintance, someone stronger than she is. Her gift is a book she'd like him to make his own, an invitation to the virtues of theft. These virtues have to do with feelings—perhaps the only things that can't be bought or sold—and yet we strive to replace them, even if it means attempting to steal them. Téchiné traces our machinations.

What I would like to argue is that *Thieves* is about many kinds of theft, not the least of which are the relational roles its characters lift from each other through bases of space and time that Téchiné himself jump-slides into to etch his composite portraits. Brushing past the canons of classical Hollywood cinema, he pawns linearity for point of view: a splintered narrative with multiple voices ironically succeeds in closing gaps between good and evil all the while it denounces the social authority that allows this to happen. He never judges his characters, many of us have observed of Téchiné; but he judges his world, especially the grand larceny by which the myth of the family embedded itself in bourgeois society feeding on the roots of private property and the state.

In the shifting times and perspectives of *Thieves*' narrative process, the bourgeois home itself becomes characterized as a house of thieves situated at the precipice of dominant social structures. Its capital, laws, and sexual practices are the lucrative strategies of a parasitic order that at any moment might be set on edge by the perverse tactics of the family's *symbolic* thieves. Their seductions, psychological maneuvers, and affective manipulations supplant visible commodities with ephemeral moments as these characters inhabit the dark corners of the family edifice to appropriate memories and roles, to seize attention and affection.

The characters' speech, then, is devious with conscious and unconscious agendas, but both their dialogue and voice-over narrations are also peppered with switchbacks of ingenuous phrasing, sensitive reactions, integrity and offhanded charm. What's more, speech often leads the characters' actions. Having *heard* themselves behave as they did, unknowingly repeating (hence practicing and making use of) each others' lines and perspectives, the characters slip and turn, some for the better and some for the worse, in the thick brew of a thieves' morality that we come to recognize as our own. In this case language, whether it be verbal or visual, voices or actions, becomes both the site and the object of everyday tactics. Téchiné's characters, in their struggle to relate to each other, are scavengers of emotions who use pockets of time to spin new webs of intersubjectivities.

As they sift through the salvageable debris of their lives, their utterances, gestures, and schemes—modes of operation—slide from the strategies they know to the tactics they learn. We can regard “strategies” as social practices that are rooted and dominant because they are backed by the myths of power structures and executed by mass technologies; whereas

we can consider "tactics" to be the temporal modes used for the makeshift, fleeting improvisations of refugees from the dominant order. In this sense the patriarchal family, the bourgeois house, and the centralized communications media may be viewed as the "tangibles" of space and the properties that anchor it; while anomie, street life, and the underground dispersal of information play themselves out as the "intangibles" of time, moving erratically both forward and backward like tremors looting the status quo.¹ What is proper to the traditional family space, *inheritance* (itself a stolen commodity in its parasitic aspect), is pre-empted in the temporal mode—by *theft*. Most interesting in *Thieves* are the slides that occur in the dominant spaces of family authority while the narrative jumps from one time to another and one voice to another among its authors: inheritance, presumed to be normal, comes to look deviant; theft, presumed to be deviant, comes to look normal.

One way to understand this twist as the logic of Téchiné's film is to recognize perversion as a mental operation that has nothing to do with aberration or abnormality and is employed by everyone at one time or another. According to Louise Kaplan in *Female Perversions: The Temptations of Emma Bovary*, perverse behavior provides the risk, exhilaration, and excitement by which we may seek to quell depression or anxiety.² Intense and erratic behavior is a way of coping with pressure, and the behavior escalates as the stakes rise. We all fall somewhere on the scale of perversion: our obsession with an image and the props that uphold it, our manipulation of sexual partners, our extreme behaviors—dependencies, abuses, addictions, thefts—have to do with the mounting pressures of our daily lives and our efforts to alleviate them. While we may each practice our own mechanisms for avoiding perverse behavior, its sources are shared by us all.

That is, we are all potential authors of tactical behaviors, and we may use them perversely to shift the syntax of old orders, to inhabit those regimes with rules of our own. In *Thieves*, Téchiné mobilizes us as exploiters of established texts—the patriarchal family, bourgeois consumerism, private property, and, for that matter, the seamless narrative of the suspense thriller—by showing us how we may dwell in old vocabularies according to new codes we create. The filmmaker transforms his abundance of words into readable spaces that allow a different world "to slip into the author's place," whether that author be patriarchy, capitalism, or Hollywood.

To see how Téchiné's characters, and we ourselves, occupy those spaces, "poaching" on them temporarily with alternate uses in mind, we might take a tour through the film's narrative as it zigzags in time and rotates its speakers. When the credits roll we hear a cacophony of whispers in the "night" of a black screen, the subconscious of a waking child, Justin, whose single voice-over then begins the story, but one that continues to be a conversation of multiple and overlapping perspectives. Furthermore, these various speakers proceed to shift the terms of their exchanges as their relations evolve.

We are at the sprawling mountain chalet of the Noël family in the cold of winter where the corpse of Justin's father, Ivan, lies in an open casket. Complaining to us of his itchy suit

and cologne that stinks, but proud that he is dressed like his deceased father, Justin spins a handball repeatedly across the family piano in a manner verging on autism. When Alex, Ivan's younger brother, arrives to pay his respects, Justin greets him with an already manly hostility: "What the hell?" he reproaches his mother regarding Alex. Moments later Alex's father, Victor, tells Alex, "I wish it had been you instead of Ivan. You'd already left us. It wouldn't have changed much."

Labeled the Prologue, this scene sets in motion the question of why Alex is such a black sheep in the family, why Justin and Victor, two generations apart from each other, both address Alex with disdain. Two scenes later, which the intertitles tell us is ten months before Ivan's death, with Alex's voice-over, the driving question turns in another direction: now we are more concerned to know why Alex despises Ivan. Already these questions have departed from narrative concerns (how did Ivan die?) to character probes (whose point of view do we trust?). Alex himself is aggressive, detached, and contemptuous. His emotional withdrawal from his brother, who appears to be striving amicably to "win him over, leads us to suspect Ivan's domination of Alex, which perhaps took a less benign form in the past.

When Ivan invites Alex to see his new night club, a space in which Ivan can diversify his business interests beyond his car dealership, Alex calls it a device for laundering money. And when Alex represents his now-ended marriage as one in which he and his wife always got along, Ivan retorts, "Then you don't get a divorce." The misfires and pressure points of their dialogue begin to pile up. Alex finds raising children too risky a proposition; Ivan extends his own family net to Juliette and Jimmy, two young adults he's trying to "help out" by preparing them to manage his club. The problem is that the prior scene in Alex's office as a police detective already established Juliette and her brother Jimmy as thieves. Alex's cynical quips are understandable when we look beyond his sarcasm to Ivan's posturing. Ivan insists on a brother-to-brother goodbye kiss, and Alex's voice confides in the spectator, "He knew there was nothing I hated more. Having to kiss him made me feel nauseous." Yet, along with Jimmy and Juliette, we witness this kiss, and we feel we understand the spiteful rivalry between the cop and the criminal. However, two elements of the subtext throw us off.

First, as proprietor of the Mic Mac, his new venture in capital, Ivan is also master of the myth that upholds his paternity: "Kids are what life's all about"; Alex should lighten up, dress better, and get laid; Ivan opens the fraternal door and Alex always slams it shut. In the glitz of Ivan's limelight he dons the myth of the happy family, the gregarious father, the pleasures of prosperity. The Mic Mac Alex mocks is the extension of Ivan's isolated Alpine haven where his pretty wife raises his precious son. We perceive his spaces—home and club—as centers of entitlement, but hollow ones, because we've already seen him laid out dead in a casket while his ten-year-old son secretly stows away Ivan's Walter P5 with cartridge and bullets.

The gaps between myth and reality are painful when we are slapped with a second contradiction: the film cuts from that

brotherly kiss between Ivan and Alex to a flame burning wax for a seal at a desk in the police office. Family is family in any court, and the depth of this claim is supported by the success with which Ivan situates himself in his space of authority by sinking his hooks into Alex's emotions. We are to discover that Alex has learned much from Ivan. For all his sparring, the younger brother has honed his own skills of dominance, albeit more abrasive ones, in the family classroom of the older brother. And these skills are practiced well beyond those four walls, in new relations Alex does not even intend to establish. Around the corner is Juliette, waiting to pounce on Alex as he exits Ivan's base of strategic operations. Her own shoplifter's mentality leads her to presume that Alex "let her walk" in their previous encounter at headquarters because he was "up to something" with Ivan. Before Alex can drive off, she jumps into his car and demands a kiss. Alex, with his own defensive suspicions, presumes Ivan sent her because Ivan is up to something. From Alex's point of view, she's a whore. From our point of view, she's an audacious petty thief. But from the point of view we will build in the film's narrative gaps, Juliette is astoundingly Alex's biggest challenge. "Why are you here?" he asks. Her answer for now: "To see if a guy like you, deadened by the rut he's in, can show signs of life."

We might not be surprised when, two months later, for all the hostility he vented that night, Alex tells us he and Juliette have begun seeing each other. What is alarming is his candor about the brutality of their relation in his voice-over reflection: "Not loving her did me a world of good. I wasn't out to please her because I didn't feel attached. We were united by a feeling of mutual contempt, the natural outcome of which was immense pleasure." Téchiné juxtaposes the sardonic tone of Alex's words with a lush tree shimmering in the wind. It fills the frame until the camera pulls back and establishes it in the point of view of Juliette as Alex slams himself into her hardly undressed body pinned against the wall. In one seemingly non-stop, gum-chewing move, he ejaculates, urinates, and pulls his shirt off to shower, meanwhile interrogating her about Ivan and Jimmy: has she slept with Ivan, does Jimmy moonlight at Ivan's dealership, does Ivan know Alex has sex with Juliette?

Ivan doesn't even need to be present to set his shadow in motion. What's more, from one tawdry hotel room to another we see that not only Alex's big brother, but also Juliette's, hovers psychically over their trysts. But the two sex deviants respond differently. Juliette shows off her consuming desire for a role model through her tattoo of her lover's name, Marie. Alex, on the other hand, who can hardly train his eyes on Juliette's body at any given moment, recalls the emotional isolation of his youth. He "didn't exist"; seeking to exit the role cast by his father and his brother only made him feel invisible. Furthermore, Alex didn't escape; his liaison with Juliette demonstrates the long-term results of competition between two male siblings for acquisition and display—of money, success, new toys like the Mic Mac. Alex's perverse response is the appropriation of Ivan's sex object, Juliette, and he lays claim to her not in the sanctioned spaces of bourgeois comfort and glamour, but in the capsules of time during which he steals a clandestine release of his competitive energies. In such

moments he may feel himself outside the conspicuous myth of the family, but we perceive him as a tapeworm trapped inside and eating at its core, hiding within a skeleton of brotherly love that never lived for him.

Now we might label Alex a police investigator who stalks the streets of his precinct as a space of the state, himself an arm of the law, a branch of the patriarchal order that upholds the capital of men at the top. As such he is authorized to bargain with Juliette, to squeeze her for secrets of Jimmy's crimes and barter afternoons at four-star hotels for inside information. But from here it's a small step to the rent-free rooms he extorts for their trysts, the cologne she steals that he accepts as a gift. More significantly, it's an unconscious slide from the strategies of Ivan to the tactics of Juliette. Time presents itself.

On a gray winter road with stark trees in the dawn snow we take on Alex's point of view behind the wheel as we arrive once again in the Prologue hours after Ivan's death. En route to pay his respects to his family, Alex utters to his passenger, "I don't understand why you came." Once again Juliette, in the same car seat where she first seduced him, responds in terms of signs of life: "You prefer classifying to understanding. But people aren't files."

Entering the Prologue this time from Alex's perspective, Justin's earlier behavior toward him, crudely dismissive, now looks logical. Alex's voice-over tells us that as he pulled up in his car, a child was watching. "It was Ivan's son—I'd totally forgotten about him." Téchiné gives us a tracking shot along layers of evergreen boughs, catching glimpses of vibrant blue through the blur. Presumably we are accompanying Alex and Ivan's widow, Mireille, on a walk along the river, but we don't

1. Here the definitions provided by Michel de Certeau are useful: "I call a 'strategy' the calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an 'environment.' A strategy assumes a place that can be circumscribed as *proper* (*propre*) and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it (competitors, adversaries, 'clientèles,' 'targets,' or 'objects' of research). Political, economic, and scientific rationality has been constructed on this model. I call a 'tactic,' on the other hand, a calculus which cannot count on a 'proper' (a spatial or institutional localization), not thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality. The place of a tactic belongs to the other. A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. It has at its disposal no base where it can capitalize on its advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with respect to circumstances. The 'proper' is a victory of space over time. On the contrary, because it does not have a place, a tactic depends on time—it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized 'on the wing.' Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into 'opportunities.'" (*The Practice of Everyday Life*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988, xix)

2. Louise Kaplan, *Female Perversions: The Temptation of Emma Bovary*, New York: Bantam, Doubleday, Dell, 1992.

3. Here again, it's interesting to note De Certeau's description of classifying: Statistical classifying, calculating, categorizing into taxonomies "grasps the material of these practices but not their *form*; it determines the elements used, but not the 'phrasing'... The form is that of the decision itself, the act and manner in which the opportunity is 'seized.'" (xix)

see them. Mireille reflects on the silences of her domestic history as "cover-ups." Even when her husband arrived home dead, she was expected to act as if this were normal, to "shut up and dress the corpse." The Noël family is a system of strategic cover-ups. Victor, Ivan's father, will falsify the death certificate and have the body cremated to avoid an autopsy. So not only the child and the wife but also the failed provider are rendered invisible according to the family hierarchies. And yet there are choices, Victor reminds Alex, as the elderly patriarch ministers from the family hearth.

In *Thieves* these choices are not so much options as paradoxes. The shifting balances of character positions in the film's revolving narrations, dialogues, and visual juxtapositions point to habitable chasms in the myth of the bourgeois family. The cacophony of whispers that opened the film has begun to give voice to vulnerabilities within those who were trained to dominate and transgressions on the part of those who were taught to succumb. Juliette's suicide attempt at Marie's home at first looks like an act of aggression against the one person who inspires Juliette, her teacher-lover. Her masochism in the presence of Marie begs the question: why? But in the byways and detours of the narrative we recognize caveats regarding Juliette's repressed feelings. We skip back to almost six months earlier, at one of the most expansive sites of authority in the film, Ivan's dealership of stolen cars, where he coerces Juliette into theft by sadistic acts of humiliation. Cloaking his operations in blackmail, he drafts her into their upcoming heist as "protection" against her reporting them, since he incriminates her in front of all four men in their mob as sleeping with cop Alex, and rubs her nose in it as if to punish her for his own sibling rivalry, fixation on power, and desperation to conquer. For collateral, Ivan pulls Jimmy in on the betrayal, presuming the sexual pull Juliette has for her brother yet never admitting his own past with her.

In the subsequent scene in Jimmy's apartment, where Juliette unpacks the groceries as if to cook but then initiates a candid and intimate sexual discussion in her brother's bed that is the dark side of pillow talk, we see that Jimmy, aside from any erotic feelings he may harbor for Juliette, has exercised a paternal control over her not unlike Ivan's. More significantly, given their father's term in prison and their mother's rejection of them, the siblings' bond and habits suggest a fluid but unspoken relation that is far more than a sexual attraction they may act upon. In the face of taboos against incest, Jimmy and Juliette practice at least an emotional investment in each other that posits an alternative family. Stealing affection where they can find it—in each other—is a mutual survival tactic, and it renders the picture of Juliette's dishonor and betrayal that Ivan instills in Jimmy unbearable for Juliette. She tries to throw herself from the window. As the second suicide attempt by her we see, which was really her first, this action means more to us now as a flashback because we are better prepared to ponder the breadth of her subordination: to Alex, Ivan, and finally Jimmy.

These shifting strata of family relations all give vent to Juliette's depression and anxiety. She bags perfume in boutiques to pump herself up for facing her deeper conflicts of

guilt, inadequacy, loss, and rage in relations she can't control. However, her ruses and exploits shore up the perversions employed by her masters as well: Jimmy steals cars "to put Juliette through school" (or perhaps to prove to her and to himself that he cares to and will be able to, and crime is the way he knows.) Interestingly all three thieves—Jimmy, Juliette, and Ivan, not to mention Alex—steal sex. But Ivan is the insidious linchpin here, establishing and perpetuating the local seat of power whereby sex is "against the law" for each of the others with any of the others. Ironically, all of their perverse behaviors are escalated by his perverse paternalism.

There is a moment in the film when, perhaps, Alex tries to be a father to Justin only to discover that Victor ("Pops") is the preferred role model, driving Justin to school in his black BMW, and that the very same props that sustained Ivan's image, cars and guns, define Justin's as a young man. In an extended scene at an amusement park where Alex is willing to chaperon him, Justin, all alone, crashes relentlessly into bumper cars, both grinning and grimacing, and then can't be satiated at the shooting gallery. He turns his rifle on Alex, who confronts him verbally. Yet when Justin then collapses on a bench and sobs, his head shaking in his hands, all Alex can do is stare down at him, perplexed: the déjà vu of emotional isolation for the grown man is excruciating. In Alex's stone-dead face is a recognition of self, a retrieval of memory he'd prefer to do without.

One buoyant image in the film offers release from the ties of the past and is the rare occasion when Téchiné draws on a language that is pure cinema. Alex has taken Justin on an outing. The scene is prefaced with Alex's voice-over admitting to us, "I didn't know what to say. He seemed so sad and polite, well-behaved." They traverse the grass of a mountain meadow with a vista of Alpine peaks gleaming with ice and snow. Against this pristine landscape and the sunfilled blue sky that frames it, five gliders rise, pastel parachutes ballooning up in pink, turquoise, yellow, lavender and green. They lift their riders, soaring, floating, landing, then walking by on the soft slopes of the meadow. Alex has his arm on Justin's shoulder. "Do you hate me?" he asks the boy. Justin's reply is simple: "I have to." Both gaze in wonder at the collapsed parachutes passing by.

At such moments in the film we are suspended both in space and time. In an uncanny way we sense their seeming arbitrariness, much as our social relations are contingent upon them both. Marie signals the ways that time can actually fill a space. Through her enigmatic relation with Alex, we discover the virtues—and limits—of replacement.

Marie's impact on Alex begins with Juliette, with whom, Alex confides to Marie, "It started as a game, but then got the better of me." When Alex realizes he's tired of "meeting up like thieves" and tells Juliette he feels lost and needs her, her response shocks him. She was in on the very crime he'd been waiting to bust. Worse, Alex, the shrewd investigator but detached sex mate, was the last to know. After she tells him, the camera pans 180° around, from his position to hers. We know she has left, but our spectator point of view lingers with a new perspective on Alex. The very intimacy he had come to



Catherine Deneuve as Marie.

depend on and trust, and most likely still does, now presents itself as a riddle of self-knowledge: if Juliette didn't seek to betray him, why *did* she play the thief? Alex is forced to look at and act upon his own past, his repressed subordination to Ivan and his aggression against him, but with results that defy explanation.

Alex falls apart once he loses track of Juliette and becomes more and more hostile toward Marie, whom he'd always thought would make as fine a sex object as Juliette. In time, he clearly uses Marie to replace Juliette, but not as the sex object Juliette once was. When Alex invites Marie to his apartment for dinner, we see him, dish towel tucked in his belt, switching flowers from one location to another, obsessed with preparing. His ultimate gesture that evening is laden with contradictions: Marie passes out and he carries her to his bed, only to steal a snapshot with his handy police camera. We next see this sleeping cameo framed on his bookshelf, the only photo in his home, as if a bonafide portrait of his beloved. The camera closes in on it as Alex's voice-over tells us, "I didn't believe in

the world I never had. I'd always known it was a bad dream and nothing else." These lines reach backward in the film to Justin and forward to Alex's future.

Alex invites Marie out to dinner, accompanies her to the opera, a first-time experience for him, and visits her home to bring her calming news he "wouldn't have told a soul." But there he finds a space filled with Juliette—not just tapes of her voice, notes on her life, but a person who inhabits a place as no other can, whether she's there or not and whether she'll ever return or not. A person suspended in time and space who cannot and need not be replaced. Ironically, it is Marie, and not Juliette, who truly vanishes. And just as she'd already given Alex Juliette's whereabouts, she sends him her book, the story of Juliette that the two women created together. A subsequent close-up of this parcel on the postal retrieval shelf, a revolving compartment that turns 180° toward Alex, prefigures the switchback to come.

Earlier Alex, declaring his adversity to books, had refused to read the manuscript; he had also chided Marie for choosing

not to pursue Juliette when she went into hiding in Marseille. Alex would fight for Juliette, but Marie responds to her need for freedom. In fact Alex, by default, enacts Marie's wisdom when he drives to Marseille, goes to Juliette's workplace, and can't manage to approach her, even to present her with Marie's writing. Helping customers in a bookstore, peaceful, poised and confident, the newly independent Juliette is a sight to behold. Far away from Jimmy, and with Ivan and Marie now deceased, but even with Alex around the corner, Juliette has used her survival tactics to unravel the web of family operations, to employ her ruses over time toward self-love in a world that was a bad dream. Alex still harbors hatreds that prevent him from loving himself—so he thinks.

Two days before Marie's suicide, he utters a telling response to her probe as to why he didn't nab Jimmy: "I couldn't. There was my family. And Juliette. But Jimmy'll start over again. Next time he's mine. I have plenty of time." He's right about Jimmy, who is easily slipping into the Noël home as its master-to-be. As Justin's surrogate father, Victor's new protégé, and Mireille's potential husband, Jimmy will start again, stealing not only the lucrative business, but also the home, he never

had. He will learn to master the strategies that will keep the Mic Mac and the car dealership and the chalet and also the various mountain spas he "inherits" from Ivan in operation as sites of a larceny more expansive than he knows.

But Alex is right about another thing: the cop-turned-brother *does* have "plenty of time," and in endearing himself to the world of women as surely as Justin vehemently separates from it, Alex has exposed himself to the tactics that enable us to steal for love—the gift that freely eludes currency as a commodity.⁴ And as clearly as pubescent Justin replaces Juliette as the back-seat dependent on Jimmy's motorbike, Alex will never bust Jimmy any more than he could Ivan. He will continue to be greeted by shouts of hatred as the cop at the scene of the crime, and Justin will continue to project his guilt and suspicion upon those who come too close. But like Alex, Justin—and even Jimmy—will also change, millimeters in time, as they learn to employ theft to their emotional advantage. Failing to renounce the biggest scam—the hidden crimes of subordination and acquisition nurtured by the bourgeois family—they will learn to break and enter the affective hideouts in themselves and others, perhaps with tactical finesse, perhaps too late.

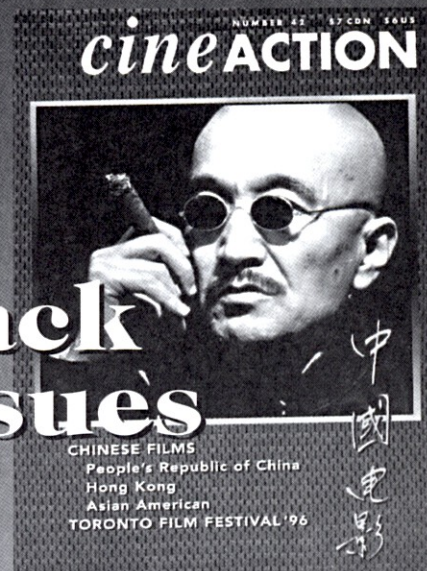
Thieves



If anything, *Thieves* reveals to us the puzzling residue in the aftermath of crimes of the heart and the latent but potent possibilities of reflection. At the outset of the film Alex is portrayed as subject to the family law of Ivan and Victor, yet armed with state law as their enemy. By the end of the film his compulsion to retaliate is dissipated, deflected by the women he has subjugated. Jimmy would hide Juliette; Marie would perjure for her; now Alex would employ as a ruse her composite police sketch as a male. All four characters are poachers on the authority of legal codes, but they are not posers; they are honest and ruthless enough to confront each other with their own truths. The point is not the conscience but the heart: through their discovery of the virtues of theft, they find the capacity to love and to grow. Justin may become even more methodical than his deceased father was, not only in operating within the laws of theft but in tying the invisible knot that will keep him apart from the affection and intimacy he needs, an intimacy whose surrender is precisely the target of the rhetoric of patriarchy. But *maybe* with Mireille, appropriating Justin's schoolbooks, Jimmy will learn to read and will find an alternative career. *Maybe* in Jimmy, Justin will draw affection, companionship, and a role model who inspires him to use his own books. Maybe Alex will turn the pages of the book created in stolen time by the two women he came to know.

Thieves shows us how we may inhabit the spaces of homes and hotels, cultural structures and languages, feelings and memories—themselves the work of our own active inventions—by becoming users of time, seizing it with our own rules, adapting it to our own interests and ends. In viewing the film we grow, as Alex does, through the emotional fibers spun before our eyes, but mostly in the déjà vu of striking moments we carry with us as potential light. The film's narrative complexity challenges us to exercise both the curiosity and the patience we need to discover each other and ourselves. *Thieves* also shows how the cinema, in this case portraits in time, can be a revelatory art form independent of storytelling.

4. The emotional shutdown we demand of boys to enable their passage to manhood—that is, the requirement that they sever their bonds with their mothers lest they be contaminated by their femininity and falter at becoming tough, independent, and insulated—actually prevents them from becoming not only strong men but whole people. When dichotomous gender roles teach boys to win and gain, and girls to relate, boys arrive at manhood ill-equipped to share feelings and women who become mothers feel guilty communicating their love to sons coming "of age." As boys are encouraged to lose touch with their mothers, they are taught to lose touch with parts of themselves as well. It is understandable, then, that as fathers they retreat from the emotional intimacy their children require of them, including the same sons that shun the warmth and empathy their mothers might provide as the boys enter manhood. We might consider that women have been the agents, and not the arbiters, of these values that evolved, as the family did, in patriarchal systems women generally served. But this does not mean that sexual difference must continue to separate people from each other and from parts of themselves. Neither boys nor girls need be betrayed into forfeiting empathy, love, and connection. One of the most directly useful elaborations of these assertions is to be found in Olga Silverstein and Beth Rashbaum, *The Courage to Raise Good Men*, New York, Penguin, 1994.



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by **A. Bovkis**

The Magical World of the Ultimate Matriarch

I CAME ACROSS SHERRY B. ORTNER'S ARTICLE "IS FEMALE TO MALE AS NATURE is to Culture?" in which she shows how the facts of female biology, woman's domestic role and the so-called "feminine personality" combine to encourage cultural definitions of the female that tend to be degrading. Ortner connects female biology and her bodily functions to "nature", which is negatively, rather than positively looked upon in patriarchal society. She asserts that the ease of an association between a woman and nonhuman nature provides a cultural rationale for female subordination; woman's biology, social role, and personality encourage cultures to define her as "closer to nature" than man, hence to be subordinated, controlled, and manipulated in the service of "culture's" ends.¹

In Marlene Gorris's *Antonia's Line*, nature in its wholesomeness is represented in the character of Antonia. However she is neither subordinated nor controlled. I use Ortner's article as a spring-board, in no way relying fully on her ideas, nor relating to the concept of nature in its full sense. I leave out the cruel and destructive part of nature consciously, as I largely equate Antonia to the "positive" side of nature, which

is harmonious, nurturing, procreating, strong and beautiful. I realize that this argument becomes one-sided as nature can also be destructive and cruel. But this is a utopian film, it is a film of magic, in both literal and metaphorical senses. Its narrative spans the period from 1945 to the present, set in a faraway village with wonderful scenery, with a big pink house², where anything is possible, even meeting a woman like Antonia. In her presence people begin to accept themselves and one another without judgement; the weak are protected and given a chance, everyone is supported in whatever they are doing. It is Antonia's "nature" which creates the wholesome environment in which people can be true to themselves.

The village is controlled by the patriarchal power and is saturated with male thought and control. Antonia does not directly confront or fight this power, she simply does not allow it to touch her. She turns her home into a refuge or a commune, which is not subject to male domination. The strength of the film comes through not in winning against the men, or taking over, but in holding her own, doing what her heart tells her to do and staying true to herself with respect, dignity and compassion for everyone around her.

Antonia's "nature" or the feminine aspects are offset by the "culture" or the masculine ones represented by the main male characters of the film. The Priest, who is a spiritual leader, exercises his righteous power over the whole community, while he himself is a hypocrite and a coward. Crooked Finger is a very intelligent man, but he disconnects from his heart and "goes into his head", therefore losing his connection with life in its wholesome sense. He represents the intellectual part of the masculine. Farmer Dan is a wealthy farmer with little moral sense; he is a brute, and is completely stuck on being a man and breeding other men, as he has two sons of whom he is very proud. He does not consider the existence of his wife and his daughter. He is loud and obnoxious, knows everything about his cows and pretty much nothing else.

Each character is driven by either feminine or masculine traits. Gorris elevates the feminine ones showing them as intuitive and nurturing, equating them to nature - the ultimate life creator. They are expressed mainly, but not exclusively, through the character of Antonia. On the other hand she demeans the masculine traits by presenting them as destructive and life-preventing. Gorris is somewhat one-sided in her view of women and men. I will trace main and supporting characters, beginning with the women, and I will relate to them from this point of view, showing that "nature" represented in women allows for creation and wholesomeness while the negative masculine traits lead to destruction. Although Gorris offsets this clear division by presenting the characters of men who express feelings, are considerate, kind and loving, (Simon, Farmer Bas, the priest who left the church, Looney Lips) and of a woman with emotional detachment and lack of maternal instinct (Thérèse), her point of view is unmistakably pro-feminine and reads as a contemporary feminist attack on male power structure.

The film begins, and ends, with the scene in which we are

informed by the voice-over that this is Antonia's last day of life, not because she is sick, but because she knows when enough is enough. The repetition of the scene creates a cyclical motion. This unequivocally connects to the feminine, as opposed to the linear representation of the masculine. The cycle creates a feeling, and is confirmed by the voice-over, that nothing really ever ends, as one end means another beginning. This approach is the approach of the feminine, allowing for the sense of spiritual wholeness, being part of something bigger than a single self—of nature itself. In nature seasons change on an ongoing basis, dying and being reborn. Gorris refers to these changes several times in the film, commenting through a narrator: "The seasons repeat(ed) themselves. Time gave birth again and again and with complete contentment produced nothing except itself".³

Antonia, who is the protagonist of the film, is completely accepting of her own death. She is calm and composed; and she proceeds with the day in her usual way. The unusual thing is that the narrator, who turns out to be her great-granddaughter, Sarah, refers to death as a "miracle". Antonia, who passed this mode of thinking down to Sarah, possesses the knowledge which only the very holy people and the saints were blessed with and saw miracle in every aspect of life, even in death.

The plot flashes back to a time when Antonia stands tall, is very attractive, in her early-forties. She is bold in her thinking and is unconventional; she is respectful of tradition and she demands to be respected in return. As she plants the seeds throwing them into the earth with a free and wide arm movement, projecting strength and reliability, so she plants the seeds of confidence and growth in all who come in contact with her: child-like Looney Lips turns into a man and finds a mate in Deedee; the ex-priest, who was forced by his vows to live in celibacy, breaks them and becomes a prolific father; the lonely Farmer Bas gains a bigger family than he could have ever hoped for, and eventually wins Antonia's love.

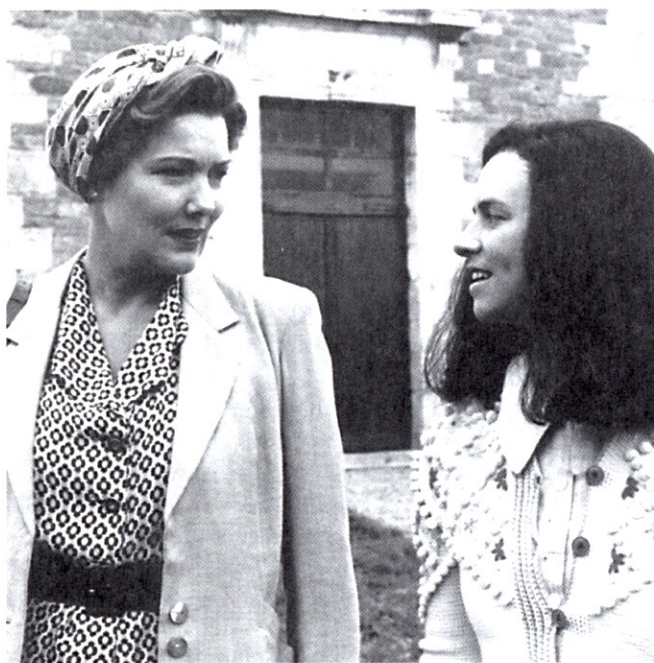
Antonia is like the earth—nurturing, embracing and motherly. She is also a natural leader and people are drawn to her for her qualities of kindness and compassion. She protects those who were unjustly hurt and gives them hope and support for a better life. She is like a good fairy. But most importantly she remains true to herself, doing what her heart tells her, not bending under social pressure, not allowing that pressure to affect her and the people close to her. That is where her courage comes through. It takes a fearless heart to stand up when everyone else keeps silent.

The beauty and the strength of the film directly connect to Antonia's character. There is nothing "too much" about her, nothing unattainable - she is not a Goddess, or a famous

1. Sherry B. Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" in *Woman, Culture & Society*, edited by Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, (Stanford University Press, California), 1974.

2. Pink colour is associated with the feminine, also with love.

3. Masculine thinking is goal-oriented or linear as opposed to process-oriented or cyclical.



Antonia and Danielle arrive in the village.

star—she is an average person, just like us. This makes it easy to relate to her and easy to like her. Many characters in the film choose her as their hero and so do we. She is a matriarchal figure—the ultimate symbol of the feminine.

Another strong expression of femininity is introduced in the character of Letta. She is a lustrous and bold individual, who speaks in a loud, sultry voice and commands attention. Her preferred way in life is being pregnant—the strongest symbolic expression of the feminine. As Letta puts it: it is not the getting pregnant, but the actual process of the pregnancy and of giving birth that gives her incredible pleasure and joy. She loves it and she seems to try to remain in that condition as much as possible. Although being pregnant is woman's privilege and right, there is a lot of societal etiquette attached to it. Giving life becomes secondary to whether or not it is in a correct social frame: a married woman is looked upon favourably, yet the same woman without a husband is called a fallen woman. Letta is actually introduced to us in the house for fallen women. There are many women in the room and they are all visibly pregnant, yet none of them seems to be too happy about it—except Letta. In her body language, as she caresses her swollen belly, and in her words, she conveys pure pleasure. She does not survive in the real world, however. She shows up at Antonia's open gate during traditional Sunday brunch attended by Antonia's friends. There are two children at her side and she is pregnant again. In her clear and loud voice, which has nothing to hide, she announces: "I have nowhere to go." That is true for many people who end up at Antonia's, and of course she is welcome to come in. She immediately hits it off with the priest who left the church, for "the love of life was stronger in him than the church's love of death." The ex-priest lovingly knocks her up every year and they live happily ever after. They do not go through a marriage ceremony, as there is no need to get the church's permission for them to do what God commanded them to do, which is to make a lot of love, procreate and be joyful.

Danielle, Antonia's daughter, connects to the feminine through her creativity—she devotes herself to painting. Her imagination is wild. It is through her eyes that we are introduced to the magical aspects of the film. At first her own imagination is more than she can take: in the episode of Antonia's mother's funeral, Danielle suddenly sees that her grandmother sits up in the coffin and sings a happy song in English. When Danielle rolls her eyes in amazement, she notices that the figure of Christ on the wall also comes alive, by lifting its head from a tilted down position of suffering. Nobody else seems to be aware of this phenomenon, and Danielle literally has to shut her eyes to get rid of the images. After reopening her eyes she realizes that everything is back in its order: the corpse is in the coffin, the Christ is no longer moving. But as Danielle gains her own creative/feminine power, she is actually capable of using the power of her imagination: in the cemetery scene she "uses" the stone angel to knock the priest down on the ground.

Danielle connects to her instinctual need to have a child, yet does not want to attach herself to a man in a matrimonial sense. She is actually, as we discover later, a lesbian and enters



into a partnership with her daughter's teacher, Lara. But for now all she needs is the "service" of a man: she needs to get pregnant. Following their plan, Danielle and Antonia, who is fully supportive of her daughter, go to the city to look for a father, as there are no good prospects in the country. They meet Letta and immediately connect. Letta proves to be an invaluable help and their goal is soon achieved. Gorris portrays men in a less than desirable way, as the chosen "Adonis" is referred to as "a nice motor" by Danielle. (Although she is looking in the direction of a motorcycle at the time the "Adonis" stands right next to the bike). She also wants to know how good his breeding is. Letta assures her that it is the best, since he is from her family. The scene is highly sarcastic, as Gorris portrays the choosing of the man in the same way as a farmer would choose a bull to breed his cows. In a funny sort of a way, Letta ends up becoming Antonia's family: after all Danielle conceives from Letta's family member. Moreover, Letta eventually moves in with Antonia, becoming part of her

commune. Danielle exerts no effort in seducing this innocent man, she does not even need to utter one word: sitting on his bike and smiling at him is all that it takes. I feel it is exaggerated on Gorris' part, but this is after all a film of feminine utopia, so everything is allowed. The scene is light and humorous and in a moment we see them riding on the bike toward a gorgeous hotel, like a fairy-tale castle, set in the most beautifully scenic surroundings. Antonia and Letta sit down on the lawn with their empty wine glasses, waiting for Danielle to go through with the act. Danielle has a definite goal in mind and the actual lovemaking means very little to her. She is obviously emotionally uninvolved, and does not even seem to be sexually passionate. As the act is complete Danielle puts herself upside down in an impressive hand stand to make sure that the seeds are well planted and then runs out to meet her awaiting co-conspirators, leaving the man to rest in an oblivious sleep.

Russian Olga also symbolizes a strong feminine aspect: she is the midwife and the undertaker, connecting to the cyclical

motion of life. I interpret her being a foreigner as an idea that a strong and brave woman would be a "foreign" concept in this village. Olga was the only bold female there before Antonia arrived. On top of her two professions she runs a cafe, serving mostly men. She has no qualms about putting them in their place, when necessary. Olga is a devoted friend. She is the first one to greet Antonia early in the film and she stays until the very last scene, when Antonia dies. As she seems not to have a family of her own, she joins Antonia's.

Mad Madonna expresses her connection to the feminine through her association with the moon. Throughout the whole film she never says one word, only howls at the full moon. She drives the Protestant who lived below her flat, crazy - "in more than one sense". After a few repetitions the howling scene becomes quite comical, yet functionally these scenes serve as punctuations for the rest of the plot, dividing it into particular time passages with their own little stories. "Moon" stands for a strong feminine symbolism: it moves from its birth to its fullness to its death, to repeat the cycle over and over again. The moon cycles connect to the menstrual cycles, and the cycles of the seasons. Moreover, Mad Madonna expresses the unconscious realm, as the moon represents both the feminine and the deep unconscious⁴. Unconsciousness links with the darkness (as consciousness is light), which causes her depression and her disassociation from people. She does not connect with the Protestant as they are of different religious dogmas, and therefore cannot come into a union. Madonna dies of a broken heart. One cannot live without a heart connection, as we see in the cases of both Mad Madonna⁵ and Crooked Finger.

All along the Protestant suffers greatly both from her howling and from inability to unite with her. Now, holding her lifeless body in his arms, he begins to sadly howl at the moon and soon follows her in her death. "They have never shared a table, they have never shared a bed, now they simply share a grave" is the inscription on their tombstone. The only one to take care of their grave is Antonia. For who else could appreciate and respect the madness and have compassion for the broken hearts?

Last but not least is Deedee. She represents that part of the feminine which is oppressed and abused by men in both the physical and the emotional sense. Never knowing respect, kindness or love from any of her family, she is presented as mentally retarded. Deedee has no say whatsoever, is kicked around by her brothers and her father, is not acknowledged as a human being. She is publicly humiliated by her father, privately raped by her brother and is related to as if she is a "sow in farrow". Only her mother loves her, but her mother is totally numbed by the same environment, driven into submissive silence, unable to feel, unwilling to feel. She has nothing to give, partly out of fear, and partly because there is nothing left in her to give, as she lives without a trace of hope in her life. Deedee's retardation is caused by her environment and is a very strong symbol of masculine oppression.

The rape episode by her brother, Pitte, is a pivoting point in Deedee's life. It takes place in a barn, with Pitte holding her mouth shut as he is raping her, and Deedee squeezing her bro-

ken glasses for dear life. The glasses are the only things that are Deedee's own, her only refuge from this nightmare, and that is why, although the broken glass is cutting her hand, she cannot let go of them. Danielle, who discovers the crime, with all her might throws the pitchfork at Pitte and pierces his hands, with which he frantically tries to protect his genitals. It is his hands that are bleeding now, as he screams in disbelief and pain. The episode of the rape completes itself in a church, where Deedee sits with her new glasses, and as of now she sits with Antonia and Danielle. She is happy, and turns back to look at her mother who answers with one of her rare smiles. In the mother's smile there is a relief and happiness for her daughter, but more so there is a hope that comes through in her eyes.

As for Deedee, with her new glasses—new vision—she begins a new life, where she learns respect, appreciation and love. She blooms under these conditions and soon finds herself in love with Loony Lips, with whom she produces a child. When Antonia discovers their intimate involvement she arranges a wedding. Neither Antonia, nor other women in the film, are rushing to get married, yet this case is different. Both Deedee and Loony Lips are considered "slow" and a normal marriage for either one was never a possibility. It is very touching to see Deedee dressed in a bride's gown and a veil. Loony Lips, also dressed up, emotionally meets her at the car by the church. It is a dignified wedding: a crowd of people gathered by the church clap in honour of the occasion. Both Deedee and Loony Lips completely transform, gaining human dignity. Deedee becomes a mother, engaging in the creative process of the feminine in its true sense.

Antonia's commune draws people who are in some way unconventional and therefore socially unacceptable, like Letta and the ex-priest, people who are unjustly treated, like Deedee and Looney Lips or people who simply like her company, like Olga and Farmer Bas. They bring their children with them, children are born to them, and the commune grows steadily.

We see them all live in harmony, work together and have lavish Sunday meals, where laughter, joy and peace prevail. It's a kind of idyllic matriarchal setting and at the head of them all is Antonia -- she is the ultimate mother figure. In this commune creativity is expressed in the living itself. The harmonizing of the people, the living in the pink house, the sewing and reaping of the crops, the birthing, to which Letta contributed so greatly (having 12 children in 12 years), is the creative process normally associated with the feminine. Ortnier writes in her article that this is exactly the creation for which women all over the world were always looked down upon, subordinated and oppressed. In *Antonia's Line* the opposite is true: here the women rule and rule happily, they are given power and they are not taken advantage of.

It is out of this setting that the birth of an intellectual woman is possible: Thérèse, Danielle's daughter. Thérèse is a child prodigy, with an amazing intellect, whose abilities surpass her peers, and even her teacher, whom she concludes incompetent. She stands on her own and she is not afraid. Her courage and her confidence as well as her intellect are strongly expressed masculine elements. Later we see that Thérèse's

maternal instincts are almost non-existent. In the film she is called "not normal" in playful reference to her brilliant mind. Yet, there is abnormality in her—she is a woman, yet she does not connect to the feminine elements, such as emotion, nurturance, intuition. Although she composes music, she does not seem to be passionate about it. After giving birth to her daughter, Sarah, she goes back to reading her book, while everyone else is overjoyed with the little red-head. By Antonia's death bed, Thérèse's mind is occupied with the exact volume of Antonia's last breath. The only time we see her emotive is when Crooked Finger, her mentor, dies.

Outside of Thérèse's being a highly intelligent woman, her character plays a very definite role. Like other women, she is tremendously hurt by a man: Pitte rapes her. He does it in revenge, in order to hurt Danielle and Antonia. But, amazingly, this does not seem to affect her on a very deep emotional level. Thérèse continues to excel in her studies, becomes a prominent mathematician and a composer, and the mother of a beautiful girl. However, her vitality and the life force are greatly diminished because of her mentor—Crooked Finger, who does not violate her physically, but influences her mind. In the film he stands for the intellect - a masculine trait, which in this case is unhealthily dark. He believes that the best thing is not to be born at all. The next best thing is to die. This attitude does not connect to the philosophy of nature where life procreates over and over. Love, satisfaction and pleasure become impossible for this man. He lives his life in his head/thought (culture) as opposed to heart/body (nature). Crooked Finger ends up committing suicide by hanging himself. It is sad to lose him, because he is a good friend of Antonia's and a great teacher of Thérèse's. He is a direct opposite of Antonia: He carries sadness, depression and inner torture, while Antonia carries joy, peace and love. He takes himself out of life, while Antonia is life and creates surroundings in which others—men and women—can have life. Like him, Thérèse also withdraws from the wholesomeness of life into lonely suffering. Her natural creativity and genius are influenced by the dark intellect, which proves to be destructive. In Thérèse intellect or the masculine, disconnected from the heart or the feminine, rules over the wholesome and healthy attitude to life.

Farmer Dan stands for the physical aspect of the masculine. From the first introduction he is portrayed as a loud brute, with little moral sense, proud of his two sons, Pitte and Janne, calling them thoroughbred stallions. He treats his daughter, Deedee, no better than a cow. His wife, who was obviously a very beautiful woman, becomes a grey shadow, who never utters a word. He continuously screams; his voice is unpleasantly harsh. Laughter spits out of his mouth for all the wrong reasons, such as when the weak are abused by the stronger ones. He is like the tractor he drives: overpowering, strong, and loud, who does not think or feel. Antonia plants while walking in the field, connecting to nature and the earth. Farmer Dan uses machinery, subordinating and forcing nature. Ironically he dies by falling from his combine harvester and breaking his neck.

He produces two offspring like himself, one more sneaky

than the other, both selfish, self-righteous and obnoxious. The older one, Pitte, is worse than his father, as he is shrewd, vengeful and hateful. While his father abuses women by shouting, screaming and making degrading comments, Pitte abuses women physically, by raping them. Pitte gravely pays for his misdeed - Deedee's rape, which is discovered by Danielle. Even after his hands heal, Pitte is so thrown off that he cannot stay in the village. It is almost as if he was exiled from this place as the patriarchal power began diminishing (as in this case hands are associated with ability and power), when women are no longer afraid to stand up for themselves. But he returns, and he returns with even more evil power within him. He is wearing the uniform of an army officer - very successful in the male world of the war and an air of arrogance and provocation. He rapes again, this time Danielle's daughter Thérèse, and he does it out of vile vengeance.

The rape hurts and infuriates Antonia so much that she, for the first time, is filled with hatred. She picks up a shot gun and sets out to find Pitte. She does not kill him, only because she does not have it in her to kill, but if she did, he would be the one. She curses him instead, with such hate, such passion and such anger, than even brave and cocky Pitte deflates in fear. The power of Antonia's curse is undeniable. It unleashes the other part of the feminine: the power to bring death. In the deep and sacred power of the witches this was not unusual and that is why they were so feared. Although Antonia does not physically kill him, the power of her hate and her curse is so strong, that he has no chance of survival. Pitte dies like a rabid dog, by the hand of his own brother, who uses this chance to protect his inheritance.

The younger brother, Janne, is of a sneaky character, who hardly ever says anything, and who seems to enjoy conspiring in various crimes committed by his father and his brother. He does it by keeping silent about the wrong that is being done. Even the way he murders his brother is very sneaky—he just finishes the job, while making sure that no one sees him do it. The antipathy toward his character is created by Gorris in the shot preceding Deedee's rape scene: he stands by the barn, rolling a cigarette, knowing fully well what Pitte is doing to his sister in the barn. When he sees Danielle going to the barn, a sinister smile touches his lips. He does not make an attempt to prevent Danielle from entering and witnessing, as his pleasure extends to seeing his own brother being caught and—in this case—punished. Yet, when his brother Pitte comes to take half his inheritance, he turns from a passive observer of the human filth to an active protector of his money. He drowns his brother, when Pitte is weakened and is reaching out for help, showing a complete lack of humanity. Both brothers represent the negative masculine traits, which are shown in their excessive expression. Janne dies of a well-aimed kick from "a much maltreated cow." The death of the thoroughbred stallions and

4. V. Noble, *Motherpeace*, (Harper & Row, Publ., San Francisco, Cambridge, Hagerstown, New York, Philadelphia, London, Mexico City, Sao Paulo, Sydney), 1983, p. 132

5. "Madonna" has very strong spiritual connotations: after all she gave birth to Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, the Christian God proves to be less than kind to women, ergo here Madonna is called Mad.




their father puts an end to any possible proliferation of this unhealthy family.

The third representation of the masculine is embodied in the Priest, who is the supposed spiritual leader of this community. He is not as stupid as Farmer Dan, nor is he as intelligent as Crooked Finger, and he completely lacks any sense of spirituality and of the divine. The villagers obediently congregate in church, where women and men sit in separate sections, so that no mortal sin can be provoked. They are passive recipients of the priest's not-so-healthy ideas, blindly following the "tradition". The priest doesn't approve of Antonia—frictions between them are constant. He does not appreciate Antonia's comments on the traditional methods of doing things, nor of her reminder that he refused to give the Last Rites to a dying friend of Antonia's who was in the resistance, because he was afraid of the Germans. Although Antonia shows respect by participating in church ceremonies, she is not a devotee. In the

episode of the spring festivities, she and Danielle discuss a potential man to impregnate Danielle, instead of repeating the names of the saints as all others do.

The hypocrisy of the priest is shown mainly in relation to women. He condemns them, spitting with anger; he uses the story of Jezebel and her daughter, blaming her for the fall of the Kingdom of the Jews, while aiming it at Danielle who is visibly pregnant by now. His language is passionate and hateful. He commands his audience, instilling fear in them, and they sit completely hushed. That same night Antonia and Farmer Bas expose the priest performing oral sex on a young girl, who is whimpering in fear, in the confession booth of the church. Although the girl is afraid, she is submissive to him, as she, like other women in the film, does not feel she can do anything about it. Antonia and her friends expose the priest, not only preventing him from continuing with this sort of activity, but also greatly humbling him. The very next day the



priest's voice becomes silky sweet, elevating women, their wisdom and their kindness to their highest. The spiritual leader, who stands at the head of their community, proves to be a rotten fruit with shiny skin. Antonia takes a deep and satisfied breath and Danielle gets the wooden Madonna to look up and smile. His sense of spirituality does not match Antonia's: in her it is innate; for after all the healthy and happy commune is following her, not him.

Other men in the film are shown with much more feminine qualities, as they are soft, kind and giving. Simon, for example, takes over the mothering of his daughter, while her mom, Thérèse, continues to work on expanding her intellectual abilities. The priest who decides to leave the church—a different character from the priest described earlier—after meeting Letta also becomes a prolific father. He is extremely joyful, free-spirited and expresses his joy of life in every scene in which he appears. After Letta dies, he gets his twelve “disciples” (his children) into a truck and drives off to live in the city, where he becomes a social worker. The child-like Loony Lips, who used to hold on to his wheelbarrow, grows into a man and eventually drives a tractor—a very strong masculine symbol. Sadly he also dies by overturning in his tractor, leaving his wife, Deedee, inconsolable.

And of course there is Farmer Bas, who has only lived in this village for the last twenty years, and therefore is “not really accepted by the villagers yet”. He falls for Antonia right away and, with his best intentions, offers her the ultimate—a marriage—enabling her to be with a man, care for him and his five sons and be completely fulfilled as a proper subservient woman. He is taken aback by Antonia's refusal. Antonia offers him friendship instead and it does not take him long to accept it. Farmer Bas remains by Antonia's side until her death and Antonia knows that he will be the one to build her coffin.

Antonia truly represents nature, for she is connected to nature in both the literal and metaphoric senses: she plants the seeds in the earth, protects the meek and supports people in expressing who they really are. Where else in this village could Danielle get involved in a lesbian relationship? Where else could Letta express the joy of sexuality and pregnancy and act upon it openly and actively? Or Deedee marry Loony Lips? Antonia truly represents magic, where life is possible for all.

Unlike Gorris's first film *A Question of Silence*, in which women are helpless against the rule of the patriarchy, where all they can do is lash out in anger and frustration and be greatly punished for it, without ever being understood, she creates an ideal world in *Antonia's Line* in which matriarchy rules. It is a fairy tale, a dream, but told so beautifully, with such sense of warmth and humour, that one does not want to wake up from it. Not all is ideal and beautiful in this matriarchal world: people die, are raped, abused, humiliated, misunderstood, etc. What makes it so special is not what happens - but how these things are taken and dealt with, how people are accepted and supported, and this particular way of how things are done is what creates the wholesome sense of the matriarchal world.

There is no beginning nor end to this story. After Crooked Finger died, Thérèse took his place. After Antonia dies, her great-granddaughter Sarah will be the one to take her place: it

is her voice we hear as the narrator, thus continuing the unending journey. As Antonia tells Sarah: “Nothing dies forever, something always remains from which something new grows; so life begins without knowing where it came from or why it exists. Why? Because Life wants to live.” Thus Sarah, the youngest of Antonia's line, will be the one to continue the legacy.

In one of the last scenes of the film, all the characters who died—Antonia's mother, Mad Madonna, Loony Lips, Farmer Dan and his two sons, Crooked Finger, Letta—all come back to Antonia's back yard. The vision is presented to us through the eyes of Sarah. Antonia suddenly sheds some thirty years off her shoulders, becoming statuesque and agile, as she twirls in the dance with Farmer Bas, who is also thirty years younger and his hair is dark again. Sarah accepts the fact that she sees improbable things, and is not scared by them. In a while these images are gone, and she sees her old great-grandmother and Farmer Bas in a last dance of life with the heavy steps of old people, their agility alive only in her little mind. But she has the magic of imagination, which is similar to that of her grandmother, Danielle. This and other non-realistic scenes - singing corpse, moving statues—make us realize that this is an improbable reality, a utopian dream of a matriarchal society. Yet there is a flip side to this: Gorris cleverly shows these scenes as seen through one of the character's eyes, whether Danielle's or Sarah's. The non-realistic images are brought in symbolically, and while they function as someone's inventive imagination, the illusion is created that everything in this film is actually real, allowing us to become emotionally responsive to these scenes. The narration greatly increases that sense of reality, as Sarah is narrating her own story, giving it an even more authentic feel.

Most of the film is carried by the voice-over. The characters are masterfully portrayed and remain memorable long after the film is over. Some of the characters hardly ever speak, like the tall and skinny Loony Lips pushing his wheelbarrow or short and stocky Deedee, wearing her new glasses, or Mad Madonna, howling at the moon. Even Antonia's formidable horse, which commands the road with its presence, is a great character.

The connection between scenes flows effortlessly. Maybe because this film is made by a woman or maybe because it is about a woman, there are no hard cuts, or hard transitions between scenes. Rather they flow from one to another, carrying the story line with them.

Although some most improbable things happen in the film, one is left with a sense of lightness and pleasure, but most importantly with a sense of wholeness. It is achieved through creating the matriarchal setting, through use of magic, sense of social justice and connection to nature. When justice is restored and the “bad” characters are punished, there is hardly any celebration or feelings of superiority, nor sense of accomplishment. It is taken as coming back to the equilibrium of “normality”, which is coming back to nature and to its wholeness, where everything has its own place and time. No matter how utopian Antonia's commune is, the sense of wholeness is real.

by **Marty Roth**

Videodrome and the Revenge of Representation



David Cronenberg's
The Naked Lunch:
James Woods has an
unusual encounter.

The "videodrome" of my title has several referents: It is a special signal transmitted through television causing a brain tumor in the viewer that induces hallucinations. People so infected are transformed into human VCRs capable of playing cassettes through a belly slit. (That, however, may be their primary hallucination, or it may be a metaphor, our primary hallucination.) Secondly, Videodrome is a "snuff" series. It is also a conspiratorial organization that may be a far right attempt to arrest the degeneracy of the West, fighting moral corruption with moral corruption. Finally, *Videodrome* is the title of a film by the Canadian filmmaker David Cronenberg.

If contemporary horror film is inevitably postmodern, as a current line of argument goes, then David Cronenberg's films, *Videodrome* in particular, occupy the corner of the genre where that claim is most spectacularly redeemed.¹ The problem with the discourse on postmodernism, however, is that it is radically split: it is in the condition of the contemporary sign, both itself and other than itself; the postmodern is both a continuation of modernism and a repudiation of it (Messmer 1985: 236; Fokkema 1986: 18; Fokkema 1984: 40 and Hassan 1975: 19). The word is not useless, however, if it promises to stabi-

lize certain stunning features of this body of film, particularly its rend(er)ing of physicality. In common with contemporary horror film generally, Cronenberg's films rupture the myth of the unitary body—a defining strategy that recalls the modernist fragmentation of the unitary self. These films also rupture the constituting unity of modernism, a critical humanist or liberal nature that had put itself in control of taste and meaning and given itself the sole authority to determine what fictions are about and whether or not they are worth the telling.

I choose to read postmodernism as a repudiation of modernism, more or less following a rhapsodic-vulgar strain of commentary by Leslie Fiedler and Susan Sontag, among others. It reads postmodernism as a celebratory movement that rejects the transcendental humanism of the culture establishment: "The best works among those that are called pop art intend, precisely, that we abandon the old task of always either approving or disapproving what is depicted in art — or, by extension, experienced in life" (Sontag 229). Among its many affiliations, *Videodrome* expresses its affinities with Pop, Beat, and Punk art. In Cronenberg, however, such allusions are

equivocal, neither affirmative nor ironic. In this article, postmodernism is primarily marked by an extremely unstable distinction between representation and reality, tropes of litter, garbage and the decomposing body, and pornography.

Postmodern texts are set in semiotic territory. They acknowledge the autonomy of the sign; they express a willingness to be caught up forever in the drift of signification. *Videodrome* takes place in a world of signs and broadcasts, and its protagonist, Max Renn, becomes (to cite Barbara Creed citing Baudrillard) "a pure screen, a switching center for all the networks of influence" (Creed 1987: 60). Victor Hugo's prediction in *Notre Dame de Paris* that the word would replace the building is reiterated in a standard establishing shot that Cronenberg uses as a signature — the shot of some carefully framed piece of institutional or industrial architecture seen beside or behind its sign — a sign that may read Biocarbon Amalgamated, the Cathode Ray Mission, the Keloid Clinic, Starliner Towers, or the Somafree Institute.

Postmodern works refuse to collaborate in the project of realism except on very special terms; the fictions of contemporary horror film (*Aliens*, *Blow-Out*, *Demon Seed*, *The Howling*, *Nightmare on Elm Street, Part 3*, or *The Terminator*, for example) problematize the technology of representation — "Is it real or is it Memorex?" asks Seth Brundle as he emerges from his teletransporter in *The Fly*. *Videodrome* takes place in a world in which representation is the only dimension of experience, and the disturbances, or ordinary "horrors," of such a place are by now familiar elements in the humanist critique of contemporary representation. There is, first, the tranquilization of experience: the routine communication of scandal and obscenity overridden by a sense of narcissistic security, so that any content, no matter how urgent, becomes a fantasy, an entertainment. Watching a Videodrome torture sequence, Nicki Brand asks, "I wonder how you get to be a contestant on this show." Later, when Masha Burochek warns Max that Videodrome is dangerous, the notion of a political context perplexes and annoys him. A second, associated horror is pornography, the sexuality of representation.

The film makes clear from the beginning that we are watching a technologized *mise-en-scène*. *Videodrome* begins as a timed videocassette, turning itself on in a world without people. Here it is representation, not nature, that has depth. Representation is layered; we generally have two or three media dimensions to choose from, and we are allowed to get lost among the layers. On the Rena King show, for example, a cut that appears contiguous can move from a guest on the studio stage to a control-monitor image.² Characters themselves are *mediatized*: Brian O'Blivion exists only as a collection of his own outtakes, like a science-fiction Krapp: "At the end he was convinced that public life on TV was more real than private life in the flesh," his daughter Bianca assures Max. And Max is ultimately written by television: "You're an assassin now — for Videodrome. It can program you, it can play you like a video recorder." Even the denotative art of photography is not realistic representation, but pastiche: on Max's wall there is a picture of Hitler in a ballet tutu.

Despite the general erosion of the real, we can easily tell the

difference between reality and representation: representation is faulty television reception, a TV picture that is bad in both the technical and the moral/aesthetic senses. "Videodrome" is the name of the film and a video series that we watch in the film. The difference between them is that the quality of the second transmission is noisy and grainy: reality is unmarked, apparently unmediated, perception, while representation is both textured and distorted.

"Do you know a show called 'Videodrome'?" Max asks a friend. "It's just torture and murder, no plot, no characters, very, very realistic. I think it's what's next." In still another key, the representation does return to its referent, with a vengeance. The sign is restored to its original fullness since Videodrome is "snuff" video and "snuff" represents a criminal restoration of nature: "What you see on that show, it's for real. It's not acting."

Postmodernism refuses to fetishize art as well as reality; it refuses to distinguish between high and low art, adoring the former and despising the latter. It is both obvious and brilliant of Cronenberg to use TV as the sign of bad art. The image with which *Videodrome* opens is the logo of the cable TV station that Max owns: a paunchy man in bed with a "belly telly." The image suggests that TV causes physical and mental degeneration, surely a perverse way to inaugurate television programming. In *Videodrome*, it is all too obvious that film is good and TV/video is bad, and this opposition not only recapitulates the old antagonism between film and TV but also recapitulates how TV saved film from being bad art — by taking its place.

In *The Fly* and *Dead Ringers*, it is junk food (itself a representation of food, food posing as itself) rather than television that generates the *drek* of the everyday life of popular culture. In these films we move from an architectural minimalism that evokes Antonioni to carnivalesque versions of the same space littered with junk-food wrappers, half-eaten donuts, and Twinkies, all glued together with spilled pop and vomit. In *Videodrome*, when Harlan, the video pirate, is scolded for littering the electronics lab with frivolous signs, he begins to eat them.

The body in postmodernism is not a sign but the site of lesions. The desire and the technology to present the body

1. This argument is carried primarily by Carol Clover and Robin Wood. The former sees contemporary horror film (particularly "slasher" film) as confounding gender roles and gender differences. The latter first established a contemporary category, initiated by *Psycho*, which subverts the distinction between the registers of horror and the ordinary.

2. To my knowledge, the only comparable juxtaposition of "real" and represented images occurs in the Senate committee scene in John Frankenheimer's *Manchurian Candidate* (1962). When Senator Iselin "exposes" the State Department communists the hearing room is so full of photographers and cameras we can't even see the newsworthy event. The scene consists of quick and confused alternations between "live" and TV images, both on one's own and on one's opponent's side of the chamber, and the cutting, which presents the altercation, is often between the "person" and the TV image of his opponent, sometimes of the person and his own TV image. In so far as it is also the story of a programmed assassin, the earlier film stands as a forceful predecessor for *Videodrome*.



breaking open and breaking apart is what most clearly constitutes contemporary horror film and a closely allied phenomenon, punk performance, which presents body mass, contour, and animation as explosive, without any circumstantial or thematic rationale. Contemporary horror film and punk performance feature the body in states of violation and fragmentation. The whole of *The Fly* is an exhibition of gradual (fascinating and repulsive) body mutation and degeneration. *The Fly* relates to *Scanners* and *Videodrome* as the slow to the appallingly sudden disintegration of the body; in the latter two films, heads explode and bodies rupture from within. Cronenberg also dramatizes an apolitical fascination with the body in a derelict state so that it takes its place in a series with debris, junk food, and television — all waste, all garbage. The redemptive project of the Cathode Ray Mission, which draws a steady stream of street people to its doors, involves showing them massive doses of daytime TV. Body is the ultimate junk: in *Rabid*, a fleet of sparkling garbage trucks driven by attendants in decontamination suits roam the city disposing of the victims of the epidemic. The last sustained shot is of Rose, the film's Typhoid Mary, being picked up and placed into one of the trucks. The machinery turns her under into the bowels of the truck, and as it does so the final credits of the film unroll.

Cronenberg opposes classical imagery symbolizing the beauty and sanctity of the body to these images of broken and decomposing bodies. In *Rabid*, we are shown a central icon of the humanist project, Leonardo's Vitruvian man: the naked male body in serene duplication perfectly enclosed within a circle. This is immediately followed by the closeup of a contemporary image of Freud — an Anchor paperback with Leonard Baskin's sketch in all its anxious distortion—threatening to deconstruct that original perfection into narcissism and guilty homosexuality. The musical production number in *Videodrome* is a commercial for a line of ornamental eyeglass frames made by Spectacular Optical, which manufactures inexpensive eyeglasses for the Third World and missile guidance systems for NATO. It juxtaposes Broadway jazz-dance and striptease with signs that quote Renaissance wholeness

and idealism — "Love Comes through the Eye" and "The Eye Is the Window of the Soul" — set against a backdrop of Michelangelo's "Creation of Adam" mural where Adam already exists in all the wholeness of a body that only needs to be charged with divinity. And in a teleplay by Cronenberg, "The Faith Healer," the Renaissance is the place of origin for a magical glove that makes bodies whole, curing cancers, lesions, and suppurating wounds.

Although Cronenberg holds to a general ethical neutrality in his films, they do celebrate the decomposing body. *The Fly* opposes a hero in an increasingly flaky and rotting state (body parts break off or melt) to an attractive villain who looks like a model for *GQ*. Ronnie, the woman who is desired by both hero and villain, shows no aversion to the former, Seth Brundle: she looks at him, hugs him, and generally treats him as if he were an ordinary body, while recoiling from his rival. In *Videodrome* and *The Fly*, Cronenberg is able to suspend visual and visceral horror by involving it in a science-fiction trope of cosmic evolution that the species resists in its perverse refusal to evolve: O'Blivion believes "that the growth in my head, I think it is not really a tumor, not an uncontrolled bubbling pot of flesh, but that it is, in fact, a new organ, part of the brain. I think that massive doses of the Videodrome signal will ultimately create a new outgrowth of the human brain which will produce controlled hallucination to the point that it will change human reality."³

Contemporary film loves the modern hospital emergency and operating rooms because they are places where the "natural" body, body technology and sign systems come together. Cronenberg's films feature sci-fi images of the body in intimate exchange with machine extensions or technological interface. These images are not robotic; they allude to neither omnipotence nor pathos as with "The Bionic Man" or *Robocop*. Instead, characters are technologized with a surreal intensity: Cronenberg puns on handguns (and perhaps on the controversy surrounding their acquisition) by having a gun melt into Max's hand and then fuse with it in several stages, until it is covered with a parody version of what the film else-

where calls "the new flesh." When Harlan pretends to blow up at Max's arrogance, he yells, "Well, fuck you, I'm not some fucking servomechanism you can switch on and off." We first see Harlan with a screwdriver in his mouth, hovering over his instrument panels, and he is later soldered into mechanical transfiguration.

From the vantage of postmodernism, all art tends to approach the condition of pornography. I am thinking here not of the 1933 decision by Judge Woolsey exonerating *Ulysses* from the charge of obscenity but of a contrary subverting gesture, the subtitle of *Lolita*, "Confessions of a White Widowed Male," by David Cronenberg's favorite writer, Vladimir Nabokov. *Videodrome* is all about pornography, about the difference between hard and soft pornography, the pornography of the present as opposed to that of the future. It is also (pornographically) all against pornography: Videodrome is, so Harlan and Convex say, a repudiation of pornography and the moral degeneration of the West (the position of modernism) which puts the Western world behind in its apocalyptic battle with Third World peoples.⁴

The border between horror film and pornography is a blurred one. Classical horror film, for example, has long been a featured site of spectacular sexual readings. The loci of horror in Cronenberg are usually displaced genitals, like the slit in *Videodrome* or the mechanical proboscis in Rose's armpit in *Rabid*.

In an article on contemporary horror film by Carol Clover, the aesthetic/pornographic paradigm is provided by Brian De Palma's *Body Double* which folds Shakespearean theater over low-budget horror film over pornography. The hero, an actor who is neurotically blocked from high theatrical expression and hysterically blocked from the performance of horror film, is released by pornography (Clover 1987: 188-189). In one sense, however, film has always been pornographic. Contemporary horror film should remind us that film unrolls through dismemberment of the body, particularly the female body; since the defeat of Eisenstein and metaphor/montage, the norm and the narrative of film has always been the metonymic editing of dismemberment. This identification of the modality of the medium with pornography is implicit in the moment that institutes contemporary horror film, the shower scene in *Psycho*.

There is one final postmodern problem: that all of this volatile and ambiguously located subject matter is a setup, a punk trap, designed to sucker viewers of *Videodrome* into postures of moral denunciation. Speaking in 1965 of the younger generation of "dropouts," Leslie Fiedler claimed that "the tradition from which they strive to disengage is the tradition of the human, as the West has defined it, Humanism itself . . . and more especially the cult of reason — that dream of Socrates, redreamed by the Renaissance and surviving all travesties down to only yesterday" (Fiedler 1975: 360). Postmodern artworks are all "modest attempts" "to undermine the humanist project which continues to promote a totalizing spirit of creativity, traversing all perceptible forms to arrive at a complete expression of self" (Olander 41). In *Dead Zone* the place name on the hockey jerseys worn by the boys who fall through the

ice and drown is Stuart Mills. A humanist reading of *Videodrome* is also undermined by the fact that we are acting out its story discursively, i.e., introjecting hallucinations, even while we are, according to one reading of the film, being enlisted against such debasing and dehumanizing practices. In revenge, academic humanism reappropriates the horror film for its own monumental and redemptive values, as in Robin Wood's project in *American Nightmare* of distinguishing progressive from reactionary slasher films or Christopher Sharrett's reading of *Scanners* in terms of a "developing humanist faith that also depends on religious conventions and a sense of spiritual regeneration" (Sharrett 1986: 112).

Brundle keeps insisting that his repulsive transformation into a six-foot fly is deeply revolutionary. In *Videodrome*, Bianca tells Max: "you said some very superficial things — violence, sex, imagination, catharsis," and Max answers, "my exact words." Cronenberg muffles much, but mostly he muffles his own cultural conditioning between punk and Puritanism.

3. This also recirculates early myths of television, that you could be infected by radiation if you sat too close to the set.

4. Cronenberg also provides us with signs of a socially invisible pornography which is an essential level of mediation between high and low culture, as in a cut from Nicki masochistically burning herself with a cigarette to a belly dancer in a Greek restaurant or a Kamasutra-style statue in O'Blivion's office.

For an excellent discussion of the way in which *Videodrome* is all about pornography, see Bart Testa's article.

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by **Peter C. Knowles**

Against Convention: Form and Narrative in Paul Leduc's *Frida*

DISCLAIMING CLASSICAL TRADITION, THE FILMS OF THE New Latin American Cinema denote 'difference' as the cornerstone of their existence as a film movement. Initiated in the late 1960s to counteract domination by European and American products, the Third Cinema encourages a diversity of modernist techniques to liberate the creativity of their artists and to assert their own cultural difference. Paul Leduc's film *Frida*, released in Mexico in 1985, is one film that embodies the innovations and freedom of form so characteristic of the movement as a whole. Distinctly modernist in its opposition to classical norms, *Frida* gives power to the visual image to a degree unique even among the revolutionary strategies of the Third Cinema. An intimate biography of the portrait painter Frida Kahlo, *Frida* commemorates an artist who placed herself in the heart of a changing Mexico and who was herself, during her lifetime, a voice of 'difference' in the culture of Latin America.

The biographies of painters that appear sporadically throughout film history generally adhere to the ideology and forms of classical bourgeois tradition. Verisimilitude is evident in period detail, each film carefully elaborating the artist's epoch, but character and social relations remain firmly entrenched in the ideology of romanticism. The artist biofilm sustains the fiction of the artist as uniquely gifted, struggling with inner demons, at variance with the social order, volatile and passionate in human relations. The genre thrives on *Sturm und Drang*—the soul in torment releases anguish onto the canvas. Personality, rather than modes of production or demands of the marketplace, becomes the shaping force in art history. With its flair for histrionics, the genre attracts major stars in each era — Charles Laughton as *Rembrandt* (1936), Jose Ferrer as Toulouse-Lautrec in *Moulin Rouge* (1952), Kirk Douglas as Van Gogh in *Lust for Life* (1956), Charlton Heston as Michelangelo in *The Agony and the Ecstasy* (1965), Gerard Depardieu as Rodin and Isabelle Adjani as his sculptor-mistress in *Camille Claudel* (1989). More recently, the influence of modernism has tended to diminish the melodramatic elements — Robert Altman's *Vincent and Theo* (1990) and Maurice Pialat's *Van Gogh* (1992) both move closer to a more naturalistic style. The artist biofilm, however, like most film biographies of distinguished personalities, challenges few of the fundamentals of classical tradition.

What is immediately noteworthy in Paul Leduc's portrait of Frida Kahlo is its unwillingness to exploit the melodramatic potential of a life marked by illness and misfortune. Frida is an artist whose most transgressive canvasses depict facets of her own and, by extension, female suffering. After a bus accident in Mexico City in 1925 inflicted permanent damage to her spinal column, Frida spent the succeeding years combating complications from the injury. Already inflicted by polio as a child, she went on to endure varied medical treatments, a number of braces and supports, several complications from pregnancies, numerous operations, the amputation of her right leg in the months prior to her death in 1954. With the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, whose conflicts in personal and political life gave him constant notoriety, Frida had a contentious marital relationship, typified by their separation and remarriage both within a single year. In the late 1930s she was romantically linked to Leon Trotsky during his exile in Mexico and, later in life, Frida received the attentions of several lovers, both male and female. *Frida* touches upon these well-known incidents but Leduc exercises the biographer's license to omit major events and relationships — Frida's experiences outside Mexico, for example — and he directs our attention to the more private details of Frida's life. In a recent

study *Art and Artists on the Screen*, art critic John A. Walker notes the biofilm's uneasy alliance of fact and fiction:

The very nature of images and language, the form and conventions of films and novels, imposes an inevitable transformation on whatever is their raw material with the consequence that a perfect reproduction of the past is an impossible ideal.¹

We never feel that Leduc aims at "perfect reproduction." *Frida* does not tell a life story so much as reproduce selected moments and incidents from the artist's life, conveyed almost solely through the visual image, linked casually in a system of visual motifs.

Frida is a memory film, an interlocking mosaic of images, essentially an 'impressionist' portrait, reminiscent of the work of the literary impressionists in the early modernist period — the sketches and novels of Virginia Woolf, in particular. The film establishes a frame for the narrative, beginning after Frida's death in 1954, with the casket and mourners in the empty chasm of Mexico City's Palace of Fine Arts, then introduces Frida on her deathbed as the controlling agent of memory. A prologue title explains that Frida reconstructs her life by "giving full rein to her memory," allowing recollections to "flow past in as fragmented and disconnected a way as her own thoughts." In the ensuing chain of 'miniatures' that comprises virtually the entire film, the camera becomes the artificer of memory, moving freely back and forth in time, selecting and compiling in an indiscriminate way. Frida has a reservoir of savoured moments, some sharply painful, others mitigating and consoling. Of these varied sketches from her past, many seem dislocated, out of time, as it were, and it is difficult to situate them precisely in Frida's chronology. Cinematographer Angel Goded's continuously tracking camera, the very slowness of which simulates the processes of memory and imagination, scans the mural of Frida's life, seeking out the telling image, revealing just enough information to register a fleeting 'impression'

The key disruptive note comes from the motif of images that depicts Frida's "heart-rending physical condition."² Images of pain, like harsh brush strokes on a canvas, intercut, without warning, the flow of recollection. We must suddenly face the impaling stake that pierces young Frida after the acci-

1. John A. Walker, *Art and Artists on the Screen* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), p. 14.

2. Paul Leduc and José Joaquín Blanco, *Frida* (Clasa Films Mundiales, 1984).

3. Leduc, *Frida*.

dent, Frida's anguish in an empty surgical theatre, her consternation as nurses prepare the operating table for amputation. The wheel chair, the slow walk with canes, the orthopedic braces and supports are persistent markers of illness, as is the governing image, randomly repeated, of the figure trapped beneath the white sheet of the sick-bed. (One is reminded frequently of Agnes, the artist-figure, also contending with pain and memory, in Ingmar Bergman's *Cries and Whispers*.) The camera vividly accentuates Frida's pain by twice scrutinizing her portrait "The Broken Column," where the viewer confronts the severance of the torn-open female body, the spine replaced by a column of crumbling marble. This is the "schism" that Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes sees as the "internal equivalent" to Mexican culture:

In Mexico nothing is strictly linear. Within each period, a form of turbulence, an inner spiral, wounds and disrupts the political life of the country ... As the people are cleft in twain by poverty, revolution, memory, and hope, so she, the individual, the irreplaceable, the unrepeatable woman called Frida Kahlo is broken, torn inside her own body much as Mexico is torn outside.⁴

Disruption, fracture, brokenness—the notions locate Frida's life and art within the discourse of a "schismatic" culture. In Leduc's film, however, the loss of health does not solely determine Frida's identity. "I am not sick. I am broken," Frida reportedly told journalists in 1953. "But I am happy to be alive as long as I can paint."⁵ Accordingly, the film, always moving towards order and reparation, recognizes Frida's life-affirming will and self-determination.

"I never painted dreams," Frida is quoted as saying. "I painted my own reality,"⁶ and Frida's reality is the very diversity of her own nature. The image of the mirror, repeatedly placed within the mise-en-scene, signifies the divided self, particularly appropriate in this case as, in real life, Frida arranged mirrors in her sick-chamber to scrutinize the face that she would later transcribe to her portraits. *Frida* incorporates the mirror image into a complex system of 'doubles'. "The Two Fridas", the first painting that we see in the film, visualizes in its parallel figures, connected to each other by interlacing arteries, the duality of the human psyche, the need to consider 'persona' as embracing different aspects of self. Actress Ofelia Medina, striking in her resemblance to the real Frida, duplicates both the Frida of history and the Frida of the self-portraits. Frida's biographers note that clothes became part of Frida's language system⁷ and Medina appears in diverse costumes, predominantly those associated with the legendary Tehuana women indigenous to Mexico. A single tracking shot therefore may include several representations of Frida — reflections in mirrors (often more than one), the face of the actress posing for Leduc's camera, the particular dress of the moment, the self-image in the portraits. Photographs further extend the theme of duality: Frida's first family memory, itself sparked by the childhood photo of Diego in "The Two Fridas", is her photographer-father Guillermo arranging a portrait; at an Aztec monument, Frida poses for a tourist pho-

tographer; later, a cameraman sets up a photo session with Frida in her studio. As in Frida's art, Leduc's imaging of the woman refuses objectification. The multiplicity of representation breaks the bourgeois code of restrictive female definition and we are made aware of fluctuating expressions of 'difference' as integral parts of the personality.

A separate motif of visual images denotes Frida's service to Marxism, her altruism towards Mexico's common people and her perseverance in the leftist cause. Leduc's picture of the international political spectrum is one of unsettling violence, signified by media images of the era—photographs of the Spanish Civil War, a cinema newsreel of Hitler in Europe, television coverage of H-bomb tests in the early 1950s. In Mexico, Stalinist assassins disguised as policemen attack Trotsky (later murdered by Ramón Mercader in his fourth year of exile) and troops fire on Mexican dissidents in rural Mexico. But Frida, as the prologue-title indicates, is "always near to Marx, Zapata and the Mexican Revolution, always moving away from the iron will of Stalin."⁸ We see Frida in her stance as activist, flinging pamphlets from a balcony in Mexico City, hiding a gun beneath her skirts at a political rally, berating a cinema-goer who applauds Hitler during the newsreel. The red Marxist flag that drapes Frida's casket in the Palace of Fine Arts becomes an assertive symbol of her party allegiance. To demonstrate the movement's solidarity, the mise-en-scene often stresses the formation of community. The slowly tracking camera locates Frida within particular gatherings—at pro-Zapatista rallies, at the graveside of fallen comrades, in the marches for peace and anti-imperialist demonstrations. Sympathetic gestures from a carpenter in her studio—he presents her with a music box that plays the 'Internationale' and later comforts her when the workplace saw disturbs her — are emblematic of the interaction that Frida maintains with the Mexican people. Significantly, Frida's last gesture — and the final image of Frida in the film — is her participation in a protest denouncing CIA intervention in Guatemala, a demonstration that she joined only ten days before her death in 1954.

And *Frida*'s near-exclusion of dialogue makes for pointed comment. "I am interested in silent film," Leduc is quoted as saying:

I had initially hoped to make a black-and-white silent film on [artist] Tina Modotti; but I could not raise the money. But *Frida*, although it is in colour, is still trying to work towards that early cinema. In films today, there are too many words. We have forgotten the silences. Mexico is a country of silences. *Frida* offers the silence of introspection surrounded by the noise of muralism and politics.⁹

The scarcity of dialogue in the film suggests that language no longer advances the politics of resistance and the film refrains from extended political rhetoric, making only cursory reference to the Trotsky-Stalin opposition and to Diego's conflicts with the Communist Party. Trotsky's one protracted speech is a talkative voice-over monologue, primarily concerned with his own advancing years and his affections for Frida. The two

extended conversations in the film — one with fellow artist David Siqueiros in a dispute over Mexico's responsibilities to the exiled Trotsky, a second with Trotsky himself bickering with Diego at the dinner table—both end in inconclusive bitter feeling. Mexico has “forgotten the silences,” the need for introspection. Only Frida, the woman of silence, actively engages in the reflection, solitude, contemplation that are inherent, Leduc feels, to the culture of Mexico. Even in personal relations, the exchange of gifts—a music box, a set of paints, a locket, a portrait—expresses the notion that intimacy does not need “too many words.” If the film does have a voice, it is the voice of song. *Frida* places great stress on the unifying role of song in a community, frequently quoting the verses of a popular or political song in their entirety. Frida As noted by Zuzana Pick in *CineAction*, Leduc's next film *Barroco* (1989) eliminates dialogue entirely in a “celebration of popular music” and its place in the cultural memory of Latin America.¹⁰

Traditionally, the artist biofilm identifies the compulsion to create as the all-embracing passion in an artist's life; we never see Frida, however, in ‘the agony and the ecstasy’ of artistic endeavour. The camera may track slowly over the details of completed works, but in the recurring images that delineate the artist, Frida appears primarily in the act of contemplation and examination, or in the role of teacher in the gardens of the Coyoacán home, a studio for art students in the 1940s. Keeping his film intimate, Leduc restricts the artist to the private domain of house and studio, not acknowledging Frida's widespread recognition until the final section of the film. (Significantly, he omits reference to her association with the Surrealist painters in Europe, to her work and gallery showings in America, even to the acceptance of “The Frame” by the Louvre in 1939.) The film's ostensible ‘climax’ is Frida's culminating one-woman art show, her only single exhibition, held in 1953 at Mexico City's Galería de Arte Contemporáneo. Friends carry the invalid Frida to the exhibition on a stretcher, a woman companion singing one of Frida's own songs, while inside the gallery, bourgeois ladies confront, rather soberly, the unconventional depictions of the women in the self-portraits. Leduc intercuts the final sequences with a 1954 painting, a still-life of red watermelon slices, inscribed with the slogan “Viva la Vida.” The colour red, Frida's colour of life, dominates these last images — the red watermelon in the painting, the reddish glow from the torches in the final protest march, the red flag that Diego takes away from the casket in the Palace of Fine Arts. A concluding collage of paintings summarizes the varied identities of Frida, reconciling the brokenness — once again we see “The Broken Column” — with the exotic, the assertive and, most notably, the introspection which marks all of the faces in Frida's work.

Frida's overall feeling is one of quiet affirmation, even reconciliation. In her analysis of the film, Zuzana Pick notes that the full title *Frida: naturaleza viva* plays upon the Spanish term for ‘still-life’.¹¹ It is a word-play that points to the ‘living life’ of Frida Kahlo. This is a film of bright colour; Angel Goded's camera takes full advantage of flowers and gardens, lawns in full sunlight, the grace of Mexican architecture. Frida has positive girlhood memories, recollecting her father's mar-

ionette show and his good-natured affection for his daughters, and Leduc underplays the tensions in Frida's relations with Trotsky and Diego. Diego himself, rather than play the conventional role of the ‘love interest’, has rather a subsidiary function in the narrative: he is the uncertain “frog prince” of Frida's memoirs, the muralist, the revolutionary, the womanizer (Frida's sister Cristina is one of his lovers), as unstable in his private and political life as Frida is stable. Always independent in love, Frida actually shows more passionate feeling for her female lovers. Unlike classical cinema, which works to synthesis and closure, *Frida* remains essentially open-ended. Leduc's freely structured narrative, what he calls (somewhat harshly) “that chaotic torrent of images,”¹² seeks to disrupt the artificially even flow of linear construction. To Leduc, as to the literary impressionists, life is essentially a chain of disparate moments which the mind connects by the very process of ordering, reflecting, balancing.

Since the 1953 art show, the life of Frida Kahlo has been drawn from its private sphere, a phenomenon that has given the Mexican artist the international reputation and, in some viewpoints, the status of a cult figure. The year 1995 alone saw publication of *Frida Kahlo's Diary* and *The Letters of Frida Kahlo*, and, at Toronto's Tarragon Theatre, the performance of Gloria Montero's *Frida K.* Leduc's film obviously takes its cue from the 1980s interest in Frida Kahlo but, in a media-driven society much given to the debunking of celebrity, Frida does not take an exploitative interest in its subject and the much-abused term ‘voyeurism’ can scarcely apply to a film that underplays so much of the overt tension in Frida's life. Previously known for his work in documentaries — and for his 1971 film *Reed: Insurgent Mexico*, an account of journalist John Reed's involvement in the Mexican Revolution — Leduc comes to *Frida* both as a documentarist and as a filmmaker drawn by the lyrical potential of the medium. By opposing the conventions of classical cinema and by embracing the modernist practices associated with the New Latin American Cinema, Leduc extends the parameters of the artist biofilm. And to commemorate the growing prestige of the Mexican cinema in the international scene, it is fitting that he honour Frida Kahlo, artist and activist, as she, in her memories of Mexico, “sings her praises to life and liberty.”¹³

4. Carlos Fuentes, “Introduction” to *The Diary of Frida Kahlo*, ed. Sarah M. Lowe (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995), pp. 8-9.

5. Frida Kahlo, as quoted in Martha Zamora, *Frida Kahlo: Brush of Anguish* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1990), p. 126.

6. Frida Kahlo, as quoted in Zamora, p. 114.

7. Cf. Hayden Herrera, *Frida* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), pp. 109-111 and Raquel Tibol, *Frida Kahlo: An Open Life* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), pp. 24-25.

8. Leduc, *Frida*.

9. Paul Leduc, as quoted in John King, *Magical Reels: A History of Cinema in Latin America* (New York: Verso Press, 1990), p. 142.

10. Zuzana Pick, “The Politics of Modernity in Latin America: Memory, Nostalgia and Desire in *Barroco*”, *CineAction*, 34, pp. 41-50.

11. Zuzana Pick, *The New Latin American Cinema: A Continental Project* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), p. 90.

12. Leduc, *Frida*.

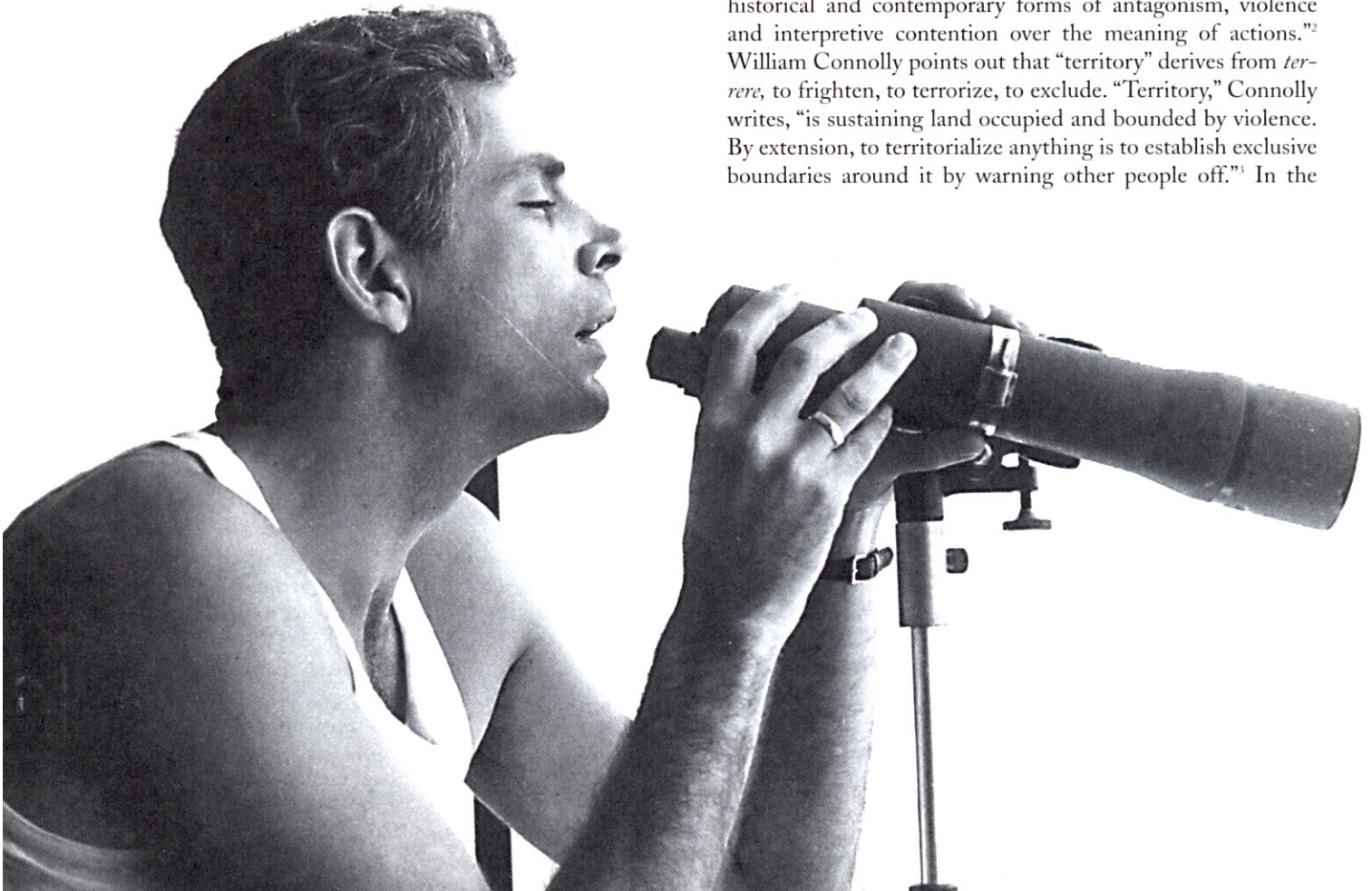
13. Leduc, *Frida*.

by Amy Beer

Plotting the Revolution: Identity and Territory in *Memories of Underdevelopment*

Will you tell us your story?
Will you whisper it to us some time?
Will you tell us: I was traced
in the path of a cannon ball
humbled by the wind, swept,
rescued from the plagues
by the wind that blows from the south?
Will you tell us: I was wounded,
drained, burned, betrayed?
Will you furnish us with swords for your revenge?
Mirrors to multiply you?
Wine to celebrate you, words to name you?¹

GALEANO'S WORDS, WRITTEN IN 1975 AS THE EPIGRAPH TO *La Canción de Nosotros*, sketch a construct of collective identity as a dialectic of performative, narrative and geographical practices. In his novel of the failed Uruguayan revolution, Galeano emphasizes the violent potential of territorial narratives of identity. Galeano's concerns are echoed in recent writings on the ethics of multiculturalism in our era of globalization. Michael Shapiro, addressing the need for a profound change in the discourse of international relations, writes that the unity and coherence of a people are maintained through the continual performance of identity narratives that legitimate a territorialized model of inclusion and exclusion. For Shapiro, accordingly, identity stories are "the foundations for historical and contemporary forms of antagonism, violence and interpretive contention over the meaning of actions."² William Connolly points out that "territory" derives from *terrere*, to frighten, to terrorize, to exclude. "Territory," Connolly writes, "is sustaining land occupied and bounded by violence. By extension, to territorialize anything is to establish exclusive boundaries around it by warning other people off."³ In the



contemporary era, the claims of formerly repressed or newly constituted groups to identity inevitably challenge the boundaries of "territory" that other groups have claimed as their own, and the result, all too frequently, is violence.

The history of relations between the United States and Cuba is replete with examples of the violence inherent in contradictory notions of territorialized identity. Most recently, in late February of 1996, "Brothers to the Rescue," an organization of anti-Castro Cuban exiles, filed flight plans with the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration for four flights to the Bahamas. Three of the four planes, instead of flying to the Bahamas, entered Cuban airspace. After repeated warnings, two of the planes were shot down by the Cuban military. Four people were killed. In retaliation, the United States introduced legislation to tighten the existing economic embargo against Cuba by extending the jurisdiction of U.S. courts to claims against foreign companies doing business in Cuba.⁴ U.S. President Clinton, in his defense of the legislation, stated that the United States will not "accommodate" socialist governments in "our" hemisphere. The U.S. response, Clinton implied, was an attempt to secure the boundaries of an official geography that claims the Northern Hemisphere as the sovereign territory of the United States, where a socialist Cuba cannot even be charted.

Statements made by Cuban officials indicate that the Cuban actions were taken, not only in defense of Cuba's physical territory, but also in moral resistance. Since the Revolution, the struggle for a different Cuba has included attempts to re-plot Cuba's position in relation to the United States. In the face of claims by the United States, Cuba insists on its territorial integrity and its right to maintain the identity it deems appropriate within that territory. In post-Revolutionary Cuban rhetoric, metaphors of territory have always figured prominently. Official cultural policy, for instance, is based on Castro's 1961 statement to the First Conference of Writers and Artists: "Within the Revolution, everything. Outside the Revolution, nothing."

Since the early days of the Revolution, cinema was perceived as one of the principal weapons of the post-Revolutionary struggle for a new moral geography. Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, one of the founders of the *Instituto Cubano de Arte y Industrio Cinematográfico* (ICAIC), wrote that in a revolutionary society, the role of art is to fight for the preservation of the revolution.⁵ The development of a new national consciousness is a violent process: cinema must "push spectators into the path of truth, into coming to what can be called a dialectical consciousness about reality."⁶

Representations created to affirm the values of the Revolution harness the violence inherent in contradictions between pre- and post-Revolutionary narratives of identity and territory, to aid in the development of a new, critical consciousness. This article looks at representations of these contradictions in Gutiérrez Alea's *Memories of Underdevelopment* (1968). In scholarly analysis of Cuban cinema, *Memories* has probably been discussed more than any other non-documentary film.⁷ While these discussions recognize that the film's principal devices are fragmentation and disassociation, none

(including the director's own analysis) specifically relates the effectiveness of these devices to the territorialization of identity. By his use of physical spaces, this article argues, Gutiérrez creates and then ruptures a connection between identity and territory.

Gutiérrez wrote that his intention was to "coerce" the spectator's identification with Sergio, by making him more or less "what every man" at some time in his life has thought he might like to be or have. Sergio is good-looking, cultured, materially comfortable, and he has the ability to seduce beautiful women. Neither a revolutionary nor a counter-revolutionary, Sergio has always wanted to "live like a European," and he considers himself an intellectual. Having coerced the spectator's identification with Sergio, Gutiérrez then creates an awareness of the conflict between Sergio's self-definition and the goals of the Revolution, through a series of encounters, represented primarily as territorial conflicts, that deflate and eventually defeat him.⁸

Initially, the film establishes the variety of spaces that make up the territory of post-Revolutionary Cuba. As the film progresses, the contradictions in Sergio's identity are revealed through changes in his relations to the represented spaces. By recognizing Sergio's increasing discomfort and impotence in spaces that he formerly controlled, the spectator becomes aware of the anachronism of the identity Sergio represents. The map of the film can be roughly divided by diegetic space, which only exists within the narrative of the film; non-diegetic space, which represents a reality that exists independently of the film; and space that is not clearly identified as diegetic or non-diegetic. It is in this third type of space that the film begins. The opening credits show images of dancers at a party. We hear Afro-Cuban music until suddenly, a shot is fired, and a body is carried through the crowd. Although Sergio later appears in this space, there is never a narrative explanation for

1 Eduardo Galeano, *La Cancio Galeano*, tío, 1. (Havana: Casa de las Américas, 1975) (translation mine).

2 "The Ethics of Encounter: Unreading/Unmapping the Imperium," (unpublished paper prepared for delivery at the 36th annual convention of the International Studies Association, Chicago, Illinois, February 21-25, 1995), 2.

3 William E. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), xxii.

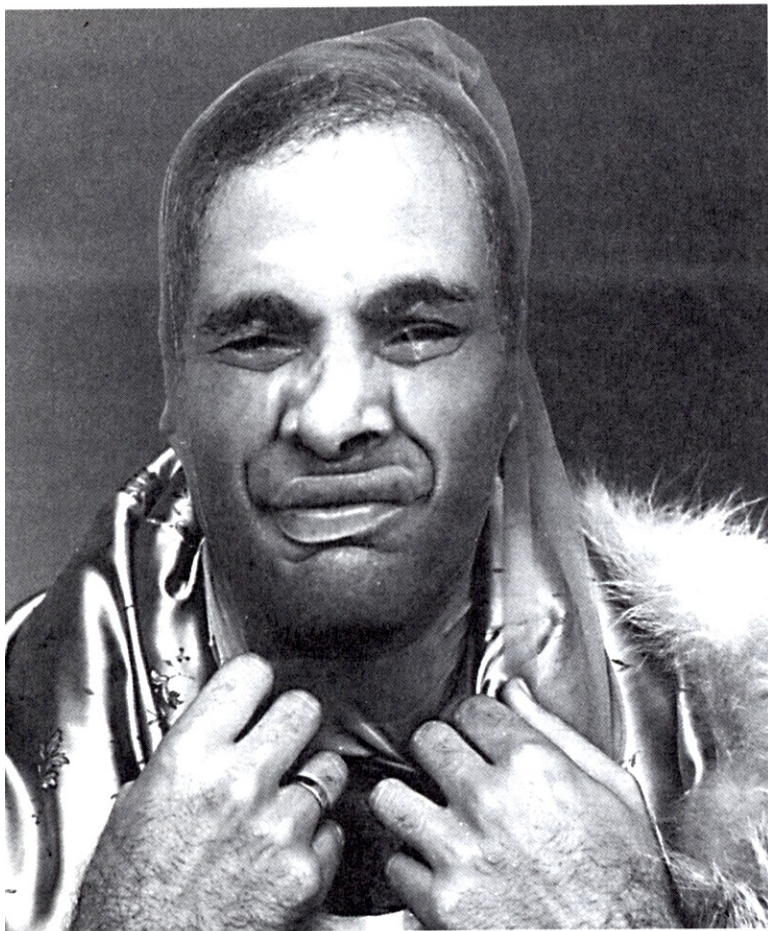
4 Under the terms of the current embargo legislation, U.S. companies and their subsidiaries are prohibited from doing business in Cuba. In addition, the embargo bars ships that dock in Cuba from U.S. ports for a period of six months. By this territorial prohibition, the embargo already makes it difficult for foreign companies to do business with both Cuba and the United States.

5 *The Viewer's Dialectic* (Havana: Editorial José Martí, 1988) (translated by Julia Lesage), 25.

6 Ibid., 41.

7 In particular, the following consider *Memories* in depth: Michael Chanan, *The Cuban Image: Cinema and Cultural Politics in Cuba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 236-247; Julianne Burton, ed., *The Social Documentary in Latin America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990), 409-412; Michael Myerson, ed., *Memories of Underdevelopment: The Revolutionary Films of Cuba* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1973), 39-109. Myerson's book contains a transcription of the English subtitles.

8 *The Viewer's Dialectic*, 83.



his presence, so Sergio seems to be somewhat out of place, a stranger, perhaps, in a territory that has been liberated by the Revolution.

As it turns out, Sergio is a stranger in every place, except for his apartment, which is the sole completely diegetic space in the film. When Sergio is in "real" space, such as in the airport and the streets of Havana, for example, his incongruence is shown by his contrast to real, non-diegetic people. In several sequences, Gutiérrez intercuts between images of Sergio, as a character, walking alone, and images of swarms of people, walking in crowds, filmed with a handheld camera. In one unstaged scene, Sergio walks in one direction while demonstrators march in another. Throughout the film, Sergio patrols the streets of Havana, as if trying to stake out a territory for himself in an unfamiliar place. Because he is conspicuous, alone, and often uncomfortable, however, the spectator is able to infer that Sergio has no claim to the territory through which he moves.

The space of the United States is represented as separated from Cuba by an impermeable wall. In the opening scene of the film, Sergio's wife and family are leaving Havana for the United States. The border between the two countries is represented by a glass wall in the airport departure lounge through which voices do not travel. Later, the impossibility of communication is emphasized when Sergio receives a letter from his wife. She has enclosed a piece of chewing gum and razor blades. Sergio comments:

"She knows I don't chew gum and that I use an electric shaver. ... I can't read her handwriting. They're crazy. We don't understand each other."

Documentary footage and still photographs of events outside the diegesis of the film introduce another kind of space: that of pre-Revolutionary Cuba and of places outside of Cuba's physical territory, but within its imaginary, such as Spain and Latin America. At times, Sergio becomes the narrator of the story told by these images. His voice-over emphasizes his detachment and distance, as if this is also territory to which he has no claim.

Sergio's apartment is the only space in which he seems to belong, and the film represents Sergio's identity as largely characterized by the existence of the apartment. Later, it is the threat of Sergio's ouster from the apartment that results in the collapse of his identity. The apartment defines Sergio's bourgeois status: he lives on the top floor of a block of flats that his family used to own, and he lives off the expropriation payments from the state. In a Revolutionary culture that emphasizes the critical importance of labor, Sergio is a man with no particular occupation. Sergio is not completely shiftless, however. Midway through the film, it is revealed that he used to own a furniture store that catered to the tastes of the bourgeoisie.

Sergio's apartment is decorated in bourgeois excess, and it is littered with the remnants of Laura, Sergio's departed wife. These artifacts constantly remind Sergio of the disintegration of their marriage and of her departure. Laura leaves Cuba at the very beginning of the film, but her belongings and her reappearance through various devices symbolize the continued

effect of the post-Revolutionary exodus. Laura haunts the apartment, through her possessions, her voice, and in Sergio's flashbacks, showing that although Cuba is sealed off from the United States, its territory continues to be inhabited by memories of the exiles.

Sergio's first appearance in the apartment is presented as a tour of the territory he considers his own. The camera follows him around the apartment, showing the bedroom cluttered with Laura's debris; the study, where Sergio keeps the typewriter that informs us he aspires to be a writer, an intellectual; the kitchen, where he makes coffee and munches on toast and fantasizes about his housekeeper; and the balcony from which Sergio peers out through his telescope at the "cardboard city" of Havana. Through Sergio's activity of peering through the telescope, the film establishes a symbolic distance between the apartment and the reality of Cuba. This separation is also accentuated by the contrast between the quiet of Sergio's private, cinematic space and the noises of the streets, just as Sergio's solitude contrasts with the swarms of people on the streets.

Sergio's character is primarily defined by the encounters that occur within the apartment. His attitude toward women becomes clear when he listens to a tape-recording he made of a conversation, which becomes a confrontation, with Laura.⁹ While he listens to the tape for the first time, he rifles through Laura's dresser drawers, tries on her furs, and finally puts on of her stockings over his head, staring at his reflection in her mirror. As Michael Chanan notes, this scene enacts Sergio's own unattractiveness to himself: the distortion of his face reflects the disturbance of his personal identity. The scene also emphasizes the lingering presence of Laura. Gutiérrez thus introduces a parallel between Sergio's discomfort in his physical body and his discomfort within the social body of Cuba.

As the film progresses, Sergio's private territory becomes increasingly vulnerable to invasions, and as he loses control over the space, the contradictions in his identity become apparent. Frequently, disruptions and intrusions occur when Sergio is engaged in a mundane activity associated with being at home: making his coffee, brushing his teeth, reading the newspaper in his pajamas. The apartment is the base for Sergio's imaginary and actual seductions of women, but the seductions are structured to show that Sergio's self-definition as a Romeo is as vulnerable as the territory of his apartment. In the first seduction scene, Sergio muses about the physical attractiveness of Noémi, who cleans his apartment, then, as he questions her about her baptism, he imagines them having sex in a river, with Vivaldi's "Four Seasons" as a soundtrack. He fantasizes about them having sex in his bed, but his fantasy is invaded by images on a television screen, first of Marilyn Monroe singing, then of U.S. soldiers at Guantánamo Naval Base, a part of Cuba that the United States continues to occupy. This scene draws a parallel between Sergio's *machista* fantasies and the imperialist fantasy of pre-Revolutionary Cuba, showing that both exist only in a context of cultural and military imperialism.

As Sergio's sovereign territory, the apartment becomes increasingly vulnerable to incursions by other characters. When Elena, an aspiring actress whom Sergio picks up on the

street, first comes to the apartment, the staging emphasizes that she is entering his territory. Elena refuses to accompany Sergio into the apartment on the pretext that the neighbors will see her, but she agrees to come in after him, by herself. Before Elena enters, Sergio frantically tidies up the place and tunes the radio to classical music. Upon Elena's entrance, Sergio goes off-screen to the kitchen. We see Elena alone, extremely uncomfortable, as she wanders around the living room. She only achieves some measure of comfort after she adapts the space by changing the radio to pop music. Sergio then tries to fit her to the space, by convincing her to try on some of the clothes his wife left behind. His seduction attempts result in a chase around the bedroom and they have sex. For the moment, Sergio has reasserted his authority over the territory through his conquest of the intruder.

His conquest cannot be accomplished without violence, however: Elena leaves, tearful and upset, claiming that Sergio has "ruined" her. The camera then follows Sergio as he wanders around the apartment, as if reassuring himself of the integrity of his territory, but he is interrupted by a flashback to a scene with Laura, the scene earlier only heard on the tape recorder. Laura reiterates her need to escape the boundaries of the apartment, of Cuba:

Let me go. I can't stand you, I can't stand living here any longer, I can't stand the heat. You stink. Let me go. . . . I'm leaving. I'm going alone. I don't want you to come with me.

The defection of Laura thus undermines the seduction of Elena. In addition, the violence of the encounters between Sergio and Elena and Sergio and Laura also compensate for a contradiction in the dialectic of identification with, and then rejection of, Sergio. As he is initially presented, Sergio is a character with whom *men* can identify. While the complexities of the character are sufficient to allow women to identify with him to some degree, by this point in the film, men should be questioning any identification with Sergio's based on his ability to seduce women. By now, it is apparent by this point that Sergio's relationships with women are neither a source of satisfaction nor of moral superiority.

Sergio's dissatisfaction becomes increasingly obvious as the film depicts Sergio's growing disenchantment with Elena. Gutiérrez represents their incompatibility spatially: Elena is bored in the places with which Sergio most identifies. She does not like bookstores; she is restless at the art gallery; she has no interest in the Hemingway museum, and she leaves this space without Sergio. After the scene at the Hemingway

9 In psychoanalytic terms, the act of tape-recording would be read as an attempt to contain Laura, thus limiting her ability to permeate Sergio's space. In *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), Kaja Silverman points out that tape-recording gives power to the recorder/listener rather than the speaker. While an extensive discussion of the scope of psychoanalytic sound theory is outside the scope of this article, the recurrence of the tape-recorder seems to be commented by Gutiérrez on Sergio's inability to maintain a relationship with a "real" woman, as well as his lack of control of the territory of his home.



museum, Sergio's dissatisfaction leads him to try to expunge her from his space by refusing to answer her ring at his doorbell.

In this scene, Gutiérrez cuts from Sergio listening to Elena at his doorbell to a scene in the living room of the apartment in which two government officials ask Sergio a series of questions about how he lives. In addition to emphasizing his lack of employment and his avoidance of required payments for "Urban Reform," the scene heightens the sense that Sergio is losing control of his territory. For most of the interview, Sergio is off-screen, and we hear only his voice, responding to the questions of one official, while the other sneers at the apartment. After the interview, Sergio comments that he feels like a rotten fruit: the structure of his existence is collapsing, losing its shape.

In the next scene, Sergio is in the apartment, looking at still photographs of his childhood, his marriage, and finally at his passport photo, as if reassuring himself of his identity, his history. His contemplation of the photos is interrupted by Elena's

brother, who pushes his way into the apartment and accuses Sergio of promising to marry Elena and then taking advantage of her. The violence of Sergio's conquest of Elena thus results in an equally violent invasion of his territory. The family's accusations result in a trial, and although Sergio is acquitted, the confrontation seems to drain him, leaving him, as he puts it, in a "bad position."

Sergio's "bad position" is emphasized through his reaction to the news of the Cuban missile crisis. He is at home, in his pajamas, when the newspapers arrive at his door, bearing details of the mounting crisis between Cuba and the United States. The camera jumps over the paper, as if scanning it from Sergio's point of view, lingering on a phrase quoted from Mao: "Trying to solve ideological problems and the problem of what is right or wrong by administrative methods is not only useless but harmful." Gutiérrez cuts to Sergio with Noémi, who has brought him pictures of her baptism. His voice-over comments ironically on how inaccurate his fantasy was:

It's nothing. The clothes didn't cling to her body. There were lots of people. I hadn't thought about them. Witnesses who are always everywhere.

As Cuba faces invasion by the United States, Sergio's world of sexual fantasy has been invaded by the presence of these unimagined others.

The parallel between the symbolic invasion of Sergio's space and the literal invasion of Cuba is emphasized by intercutting, in the final scenes, between Sergio and images of Cuba's preparations for the U.S. military blockade. These scenes are narrated by the voices of Kennedy, Castro, and Sergio, with each presenting their vision of the geography of Cuba. Kennedy calls Cuba's leaders "puppets and agents of an international conspiracy," implying that Cuba now has been subsumed within the moral territory of the Soviet Union. For Sergio, the island has become a trap, from which he cannot escape. He sees no possibility of Cuba defending itself against:

It's no use protesting. I'll die like the rest. This island is a trap. We're very small, and too poor. It's an expensive dignity.

Sergio's defeatism is contrasted with the defiance of Castro, who speaks from Sergio's television:

No one is going to come to inspect our country, because we grant no one the right. We will never renounce the sovereign prerogative that within our frontiers we will make all the decisions and we are the only ones who will inspect anything.

Castro describes Cuba as a fortress, capable of withstanding any threat, and his words emphasize Sergio's defeat: as Castro insists on the integrity of Cuba, Sergio has lost his claim to his territory, reduced, in the final scene, to sitting in his apartment, impotent and alone, flicking his cigarette lighter off and. Sergio may end up looking like a rat in a trap, but it is essential to Gutiérrez's project of coercing identification that Sergio have some redeeming traits. At times, the dialectic between Sergio and Cuba that surfaces in his musings exposes certain "truths" about the space that represents Cuban identity. For example, Sergio is able to place Cuba firmly in Latin America (and not in some more "developed" place). His reflection on a remark by his friend Pablo ushers in a series of images of starving children, and Sergio comments:

He says the only thing a Cuban can't stand is hunger. All the starvation we've gone through since the Spaniards came! In Latin America four children die every minute due to illnesses ...caused by malnutrition. After ten years there will be 20 million dead. The same number of deaths caused by the Second World War.

Similarly, Sergio comprehends the significance of Hemingway, who colonized a small piece of Cuba. Ultimately, however, the identity Sergio represents is doomed. In his writ-

ings, Gutiérrez described Sergio's defeat as a military and political failure:

[Sergio's] contradiction, the source of what is eating away at him, lies in his knowing that he is alienated within cultural patterns which are not those of his own environment and that nevertheless he cannot assert his condition through a position of struggle. He is already a defeated man who reveals the cultural colonization that has victimized us throughout our history.¹⁰

As Gutiérrez puts it, the point of *Memories* is to assist the audience to critique itself.¹¹ He creates an increasing awareness of the inconsistency of the spectator's own identification with Sergio, so that the spectator will leave the theater dissatisfied, but ready to channel that dissatisfaction into revolutionary action.¹² While some foreign critics understood the project of the film, others misread it as a critique of socialism, rather than as an invitation to develop a critical sensibility.¹³ Significantly, those who misread the text saw the film as an affirmation of their own national values and geographical imaginary. For instance, a British critic who understood that the missile crisis symbolized external, political pressures finally impinging on Sergio's situation, threatening his nonalignment and revealing the impossibility of the individual solution, finished by over-identifying with Sergio, reading the ending of the film as an implicit *criticism* of the new Cuban society and of the fate of the intellectual bourgeois.¹⁴

In the United States, the film became the subject of a protracted struggle over distribution. The U.S. government, significantly, fought to bar the film from entering U.S. territory. *Memories* was scheduled to be one of several films presented in a festival of Cuban films sponsored by, among others, the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The festival was canceled when the Treasury Department denied import licenses for several of the Cuban films, citing the embargo legislation to defend its position that showing the films was not in the national interest.¹⁵ When the film was finally released in 1973, it received the National Society of Film Critics Award, but this time Gutiérrez was excluded from the United States through a denial of his visa to attend the award ceremony.

In his remarks at the ceremony, Andrew Sarris, the presi-

10 *The Viewer's Dialectic*, 84.

11 *Ibid.*, 68.

12 *Ibid.*, 84-85.

13 Most of the reviews comprehended, at some level, a connection between territorialization and identity. Robert Hatch, the film critic for *The Nation*, did not. Hatch's review illustrates that if this connection was not made, the point of the film was utterly lost: Hatch found the film to be an overwhelmingly depressing exploration of the critical doubts of youth, with a central character "much given to solitary walking and prone sprawling on unmade beds." *The Nation*, June 11, 1973, 764.

14 Don Allen, "Memories of Underdevelopment," *Sight and Sound*, London, Autumn 1969.

15 In *Memories of Underdevelopment: The Revolutionary Films of Cuba*, Michael Myerson gives a complete account of the controversy. The expenses of the legal battle resulted in the bankruptcy of the film's distributor.



dent of the Society, dismissed the centrality of the political struggle, stating that the award was motivated more by artistic than political concerns. In addition, Sarris congratulated Gutiérrez for his "very personal and very courageous confrontation of the artist's doubts and ambivalences regarding the Cuban Revolution."¹⁶ Gutiérrez commented that Sarris' reading of *Memories* and his identification with Sergio is "consistent with a whole way of thinking prevalent in the United States and with a way of defending self interests which are not, of course, those of the Revolution."¹⁷

Gutiérrez wrote that the ethical problem of the revolutionary filmmaker is to develop a cinema that motivates a critical sense, without haranguing, a cinema that criticizes and at the same time strengthens the reality of the Revolution.¹⁸ By creating a character with contradictions, he did not want to create ambiguity, but rather to present the spectator with the opportunity to observe the contradictions at a distance and thus to encourage a critical attitude, "that is, a 'choosing of sides.'"¹⁹ In his recollections of the misreadings of the film, which he called manipulations, Gutiérrez underlined the territorial nature of the Cuban struggle:

Manipulation has become a kind of evil spirit which can manifest itself where and when least expected. The constant threat that weighs on all those who want to express themselves in a given medium and whose action can have certain repercussions, gets translated into a healthy concern not to lose sight of the ground we are walking on, the values we are defending, and the enemies against whom we are fighting. That implies that we would have to be very naïve if we did not know that there are actions which — in spite of the good faith in which they are executed — propitiate the enemy's momentary appropriation of some of our weapons.²⁰

In the end, the success of the project might be judged by the degree to which the weapons used to redefine identity are appropriated and manipulated. When new national identities cross the "magic threshold of enactment," Connolly writes, the stability of established national identities is disrupted: "to become something new is to *move* the self-recognition and standards of judgments endorsed by other constituencies to whom you are connected."²¹ The greater the threat posed by a new group's self-definition, the greater must be the need of established groups to manipulate the representations of the new identity so as to minimize the amount of territory lost.

As a representation of an identity struggle, *Memories of Underdevelopment* is an allegory of territorial shifting. Like the bourgeois values he represents, Sergio has no safe harbor within Cuba's post-Revolutionary moral geography. Through Sergio's increasing alienation from his territory, Gutiérrez depicts Cuba's internal remapping of the hierarchy of social classes, and its external remapping of the place of the United States and Europe in the Cuban imaginary.

To return to the events of February 1996, the U.S. response to the threat posed by Cuba's remapping has been to insist on the superiority and supremacy of its world map and to attempt to impose its map on other nations by restricting their ability to conduct commercial relations with Cuba. The deaths of four people, and the misery that will result from additional interference in Cuba's economy, demonstrate the concrete stakes of this stubbornness.

16 Andrew Sarris, "A Tale of Two Circles (Film in Focus)," *The Village Voice*, New York, February 14, 1974.

17 *The Viewer's Dialectic*, 71.

18 *Ibid.*, 48.

19 *Ibid.*, 81.

20 *Ibid.*, 69.

21 Connolly, xvi (emphasis in original).



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